



Visual Technologies within a Consumerist Culture.

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Abstract

The use of visual technology is now a familiar medium of communication in most churches across New Zealand and Australia. Its accessibility and effectiveness in branding has had wide appeal especially to those leading large churches, who are eager to promote their identity, enlarge the size of their existing congregation(s), and expand influence within a consumerist-culture of lifestyle choices. Large Pentecostal churches are some of the most adept at utilising and absorbing these visual technologies, and do so, to great effect. This creates a level of vulnerability within Pentecostalism which largely goes unnoticed – the hidden absorption of a consumptive way of being. The pragmatism of its leaders to be relevant within this culture creates its own blind-spot. This quest for relevance tends to negate the need for theological critique and a robust process by which to evaluate various visual technologies thus allowing elements of secularity the scope to shape and re-shape congregational identity.

In this paper I discuss to what extent these visual technologies (an aberration of contemporary culture) are shaping a Pentecostal ecclesia and the behavioural patterns of its participants. A brief explanation of how images work is offered. This is followed by a case study of East Auckland Elim Christian Centre (EE) and its use of visual technologies. (EE is one of the largest churches in Auckland). The paper argues that while EE is very effective in communicating its identity and vision, its absorption of visual advertising practices (and thus of popular culture) makes it susceptible to the secular forces that run counter to the gospel, and may even in time, undermine the integrity of its own vision.

Introduction

Motivation for this research developed out of a concern about the adoption and absorption of sophisticated advertising techniques that were being used by large Churches to attract members. I was interested to learn to what extent the use of visual technologies might be having on Pentecostal congregations, and, to what the extent this influence might be having on the Christian identity of congregants and congregational life more widely.

I had a suspicion that the prolific use and adoption of visual technologies might actually be shaping congregants in ways that were contrary to the gospel. That is, at a deeper level, the message of slick advertising and hi-tech sophistication might be (in)forming congregants to be better consumers rather than the better Christian disciples.

Research Methodology

My methodological approach draws upon Hedi Campbell's work, *When Religion Meets New Media*, which investigates the reactions of a variety of religious groups to the introduction of new forms of media into their communities and lives of faith (Campbell 2010). Her book suggests a different starting point, one that considers "religious individuals and communities as active, empowered users of new media who make distinctive choices about their relationship with technology in light of their faith community history, and contemporary way of life" (Campbell 2010). Campbell's work goes some way in offering a helpful tool by which to access Pentecostal congregations and the extent to which they may monitor their use of, and engagement with, new forms of media. I make use of Campbell's "four stages framework" (p. 188-189) as a tool to gain a greater understanding of a particular Pentecostal ecclesia: its history and tradition, core values and patterns, negotiation process, and the communal framing and discourse around its use of technology. The sample given in this essay is of a large Pentecostal church located in the eastern suburbs of Auckland. This church identifies itself as Elim Christian Centre – East (EE).

The research approach is qualitative and is comprised of a series of observations and interviews. EE's building decor and property, along with four services on a given Sunday are observed. From these observations, nine significant images were selected. This was followed up by an interview process involving sixteen interviews done in two cycles. The first cycle included the senior (and founding) pastor, the senior associate pastor, a retired elder, and the design team. The nine images, gathered from the observation process, were used in the second cycle of interviews. In this cycle ten congregants were interviewed inclusive of a focus group of four people (of varying age, gender and ethnicity). The data was analysed by employing various techniques. These techniques included noting patterns, seeing plausibility, clustering, counting, making comparisons, building a logical chain of coherence and making conceptual/theoretical coherence (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009).

Research Rationale

The argument for examining Pentecostal churches over other denominations is guided by the following three considerations.

Firstly, Pentecostal congregations in New Zealand Aotearoa today are amongst some of the biggest and most visible churches in the country. This reality was inconceivable fifty years ago (Knowles 2006) when mainline churches enjoyed a loyal constituency of followers (Davidson & Lineham 1987). Belonging was built upon a

participant's loyalty to his or her religious tradition despite geographic inconvenience and personal preference. This religious scenario has long since been replaced by a new social posture. Loyalty and belonging now take their cue from a visually sensitised culture of advertising and an individual's freedom to choose. It is within this context that religious fervour and popular culture have in many ways converged.

Secondly, Pentecostals' readiness to identify with, adapt, and absorb culture are characteristics that shape its peculiar ethos in any given context. Harvey Cox (1995) poignantly observes that "Pentecostalism has the same uncanny capacity to be at home anywhere. It absorbs possession in the Caribbean, ancestor veneration in Africa, folk healing in Brazil, and shamanism in Korea. But everywhere it remains recognisable as Pentecostalism." He goes on to say that "Pentecostalism's phenomenal power to embrace and transform almost anything it meets in the cultures to which it travels is one of the qualities that give it such remarkable energy and creativity" (p. 147-148). It should not be surprising to find that Visual Technology in its various forms, from hi-tech multi-media devices to professional graphic designers, is now an intrinsic part of what one may experience when entering a large Pentecostal church. The readiness to adopt visual technology by the tradition is arguably a logical contextualisation of a more general and global trend towards a visual culture (Sturken & Cartwright 2009).¹

Thirdly, this capacity on the part of a Pentecostal ecclesia to absorb elements of its host culture taps another axiom of self-understanding: relevance.² The desire to be contemporary and have a relevant message flows out of historical themes that have given shape to Pentecostalism since its beginnings (Flett 2011). At play within the tradition is the imperative of mission which in the New Zealand context carries the posture of needing to be relevant. Not surprisingly, the familiar tag-lines of "being relevant" and "being contemporary" have emerged as influential texts within the tradition. This is particularly evident over the last twenty years when both tag-lines have been regularly used by Pentecostal groups to promote their identity. This is in part an attempt to attract new members. The language itself may carry significance in understanding the attitude of larger Pentecostal churches towards visual technologies and their apparent eagerness to keep in step with what the marketplace has to offer. Moreover, the readiness of a Pentecostal congregation to use visual media to create cultural capital and gain ground may offer insight into the logic and trajectory of a movement, which because of its particular priorities and commitments may make it permeable to the influences of consumer culture (Dunn 2008).³ This is because they quickly adopt technology as a relevant and an effective means to communicate their identity and get their message out into the public domain.

¹ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright acknowledge the dominant role that visual and communication technologies now have in a globalised world. They state: "Our lives are increasingly dominated by the visual and by communication technologies (both wired and wireless) that allow for the global circulation of ideas, information, and politics" (p.1).

² Linda Flett states: "[B]etween 1990 and 2008, [Assemblies of God New Zealand and the Elim Churches of New Zealand] demonstrated their commitment to relevance. Elim moved early in this period to embrace fresh methodologies and sought to keep pace with changing attitudes. However, the extent to which new ideas were embraced [by both Elim and Assemblies of God New Zealand] was subject to a much deeper commitment to the Great Commission and to be 'Spirit led'" (Flett 2011, p. 73).

³ Robert Dunn defines consumer culture by stating that "[It] consists of a system of meanings, presentations, and practices that organise consumption as a way of Life. Consumerism, in contrast, is an ideology that seductively binds people to this system" (2008, p. 8)

In view of these considerations, we will now briefly explore contemporary culture and the significance of images within this contextual frame.

Contemporary Culture and the Significance of Images

To speak of contemporary culture in New Zealand is to acknowledge the dominant narrative of a capitalist consumerism that fundamentally shapes the corporate and individual identities of those living in Western societies (Dunn 2008). Advanced capitalist societies like New Zealand operate on a matrix of deeply-held assumptions that orient human identity around an individualised view of self. This self is fully realised when, and to the extent, an individual is able to imbibe the consumptive ideals of a capitalist society and be in a position to consume. Dunn (2008), speaking out of a North American context, states that “deeply rooted in the profit motive, consumerism is now a widely shared ideology and worldview capable of creating strong attachments to consumption as a way of life, based on a belief in the enduring power of material possessions and commercial distractions to bring happiness and fulfilment” (p. 8). This form of capitalism perpetuates the myth of consumer choice and promotes the idolisation of desire. In this respect consumer culture “consists of a system of meanings, representations and practices that organise consumption as a way of life” (Dunn 2008, p. 8). The significance of choice in our desire, want, or need, to be contemporary raises the issue of subjectivity and the intriguing problem of insatiability. This describes the cultural logic of contemporary culture, a logic that transforms the inherited frameworks of moral meaning and social obligation. “To be contemporary” then may give assent to a particular posture that identifies with the latest fashion or technology, and gives impetus to a consumptive disposition.

Some of the key issues that arise from this socio-cultural context are crucial to note. I have identified five that signal concern for societies like New Zealand (who are wedded to a consumptive way of life).

The first of these is the systematic arousal of consumer desire. This features in the festive and day-to-day rhythms of contemporary culture itself.⁴ It is also celebrated in the increasing ease and accessibility of commodities. Moreover, desire itself has become a product, an object to be manipulated. In a capitalist economy like New Zealand, much depends on the market’s ability to over-produce goods while simultaneously producing within consumers the desire to purchase those goods.

Secondly, and related, is the power and the triumph of advertising. The role advertising plays in a consumptive culture cannot be overstated. Advertisements evoke allusions of promise and abstract worlds, which are “situated in the present but in an imagined future” (Sturken & Cartwright 2009). The promise of a better self-image, a better appearance, or more prestige, all create a feeling of dissatisfaction. This is at the heart of the advertising industry. Sturken and Cartwright (2009), reflecting on the work of Jacques Lacan, speak of desire and lack as central motivating forces in our lives. They go on to argue that “it is this drive to fill our sense of lack that allows advertising to speak to our desires so compellingly” (p. 278). Their perspective raises concerns about the ways advertising is utilised by church organisations in the promotion of their identity and life, which will be explored later in this essay.

⁴ “Boxing day” sale promotions and other public-holiday promotions are examples of commercialism and consumptive rhythms taking root in popular culture.

The third issue is the influential role media and advertising images play in how we see ourselves. Closely tied to advertising is the issue of identity. In recent academic discourse, there is a general consensus that consumption and consumer culture are now a focal point of identity formation in advanced societies (Dunn 2008). No longer is identity based upon inherited, externally imposed systems of beliefs and values, but rather upon an individual's effort, will and self-interest in establishing their own place within society. To this extent, the embrace or evasion of particular material possessions, appearances, or even experiences have increasingly become the commodity/sign of various codified and individualised modes of identity. "[These] lifestyle identifications serve not only as means of social and cultural placement as dictated by the semiotic codes of status, but also as vehicles of self-expression and fulfilment" (Dunn 2008, p. 188). Advertising has thus played a significant role in re-shaping public imagination, eroding the hold of traditional and conventional affiliations while strengthening new definitions of self and others around material possessions and lifestyle.

Individualism is yet another issue nurtured by consumerism. The development of economic individualism and 'free market' capitalism has created a binary opposition within culture between 'winners' and 'losers', between the 'successful' and the 'unsuccessful', between those 'in' and those 'out'. Consumerism has created an ethos of competitiveness (Dunn 2008). At a structural level, this causes ever-increasing levels of social fragmentation and isolation.

The fifth issue to emerge is the social dislocation and the psychological disconnectedness of people. The market's dependence on ever-changing styles and fashion destabilises identity. This perpetuates a sense of dislocation and distance about one's own existing space, yet at the same time heightens the possibility of something new, promising pleasure, fulfilment and reconnection. The disposal of 'the old' for 'the new' expressed in various forms, even in churches, has given rise to the elevation of novelty and the degradation of routine. Bauman names this aptly in stating that "being bored, in addition to making one feel uncomfortable, is turning into a shameful stigma" (Bauman 2007, p. 130). The advertising industry plays a crucial role in cementing this myth. Its image-making apparatus constructs meaning that relationally bonds consumers not just with product (which is quickly displaced by a newer version) but with brand (Bauman 2007). This relationship is not just with material products but extends to services and, increasingly, the consumption of images, events and representations. The power to shape imagination in this respect is notoriously selective (Bauman 2007). It is guided by performance and a fanciful world of new experiences to be had.

In summary, 'to be contemporary' (within the New Zealand Aotearoa context) is to function within the cultural framework of an advanced capitalist society built on a consumptive way of life. This way of life is cluttered with advertising images and messages that confront us daily. Sturken and Cartwright (2008) make that point that "consumerism is deeply integrated into daily life and the visual culture of the societies in which we live in, often in ways we do not recognise" (p. 266). This is a significant point because a distinctive contour of contemporary culture is the prevalence of images and the role image-making plays in the communication of ideas and practices. Here, the lines separating visual culture and consumerism are blurred. This warrants an examination of consumerism in relation to its use of images.

Consumerism and the Use of Images

It is important to recognise that visual culture is the platform upon which consumptive ideologies disseminate. This is particularly evident in the realm of marketing where image-making has become the sharp edge of an effective retail industry. As images are not limited by the same conventions as words, their fluidity to penetrate culture and embed ideas is much greater. The genius of consumerism is in its ability to do just that – to create a fertile environment where people identify with what they see.

The most explicit use of image by consumerism is through the advertising industry and the way it is able to exploit temporal space. Through the use of images, assumptions about desire, what is novel, glamorous and pleasurable, and what is of beauty and of social value, are conceptualised, constructed and lived out in virtual worlds, digitally embellished to advance product participation and appeal. These perceived but fanciful realities have, as Sturken and Cartwright (2008) assert, “the power to conjure an absent person, the power to calm or incite to action, the power to persuade or mystify, [and] the power to remember” (p. 9). The continual advancement of imagining technologies have only served to further enhance the power of advertising. The extrapolation of human experiences via an image is not just the communication of ideas but the realised participation of virtual worlds where one enters momentarily and experiences a sense of gratification and pleasure.

Consumerism also uses image to commodify experience. Images are thoughtfully framed in an advocacy of ideas that promote a therapeutic discourse of self-improvement and individual wellbeing. They are used to comfort and create a sense of prestige, tradition and authenticity. In the context of advertising, images provide visual pleasure and sell the idea of belonging. Sturken and Cartwright (2008) observe that “[images of] ethnicity and race are used in advertisements to demonstrate social awareness and to give a product an element of cultural sophistication” (p. 278). This is particularly evident in the tourism industry where cultural sophistication is fleshed out in a host of commodified experiences. Each is codified by images depicting a virtual world of leisure and adventure. It is a package designed to evoke the imagination with thoughts of wellbeing that promise fulfilment and momentary escape from the routine of everyday life. In a similar manner but less explicit, religious experience has also become the object of consumption. Images of vibrant worship offer the possibility of transcendence, which serves as a gateway to salvation and an escape from the world and human limitation.

Images are not only used to commodify experience, but also to create cultural capital. Hunter (2010) argues that culture is not neutral in relation to power but a form of it. He states that “like money, accumulated symbolic capital translates into a kind of power and influence. But influence of what kind? It starts as credibility, an authority one possesses which puts one in a position to be listened to and taken seriously. It ends as the power to define reality itself” (Hunter 2010, p. 36).

One expression of this is the way in which images fabricate celebrity power and status. The importance and influence of a person is amplified when their image is projected through visual media and viewed by audiences in the public domain. This projection is an endowment that has the power to exaggerate importance and construct a public persona of credibility, even authority that gives power to the personality well beyond their temporal sphere of influence (Sturken & Cartwright 2008).

Given that images play a significant and crucial role in our lives, both shaping and framing the way we see the world, and given the symbiotic relationship that exists between what we see and how we respond to our environment, how do images actually work? In the broadest sense, images are bound within their given social and historical contexts where modes of meaning and interpretation are subject to those cultures out of which they are generated. Ironically, not only do images arise from culture, they can also shape culture. Several elements of how images work are worthy of consideration.

Firstly, images work by mediating meaning, and do so in a persuasive manner. Sara Morgan (2005) in a paper entitled *“More than Pictures? An Exploration of Visually Dominant Magazine Ads as Arguments”* contends that “consumers are doing more than emotionally responding to ads; they appear to be extracting basic arguments from them” (p. 146). This raises questions about the persuasive nature of images and structures of power that create, edit and deliver visual media. Moreover, it suggests that visual communication is neither passive nor neutral, but in fact active and persuasive, and in some cases deceptively seductive.

Secondly, and subsequently, images have persuasive power to influence human behaviour. This persuasive power is visible in rhetorical artistry of images. The semiotic notion of intertextuality means the boundaries of an image are permeable (Chandler 2012). By linking genres, images and text, new and ambiguous meanings become imbedded in the message structure. The orchestration of this becomes a powerful mechanism in the art of persuasion. Scholars argue that “intertextuality is a conscious encoding device employed by authors and producers to invite particular audience responses and attract certain viewers” (Otto & Walter, in Campbell & La Pastina (eds) 2010, p. 429). An example of this can be seen in the SmallGroup visual (figure 1.) developed and used by Elim Christian Centre - East (2012) when rebranding their small group ministry.

In a strategy to lightly entertain and dazzle viewers, the image demonstrates the use of a conscious encoding device. This device is called parodic allusion. The technique refers “to the incorporation into one text of a caricature, through imitation or exaggeration, of another. It offers no commentary on the original text. Rather, it seeks to amuse through juxtaposition – a goal that is enhanced by the reader’s recognition of the parodic gesture (Otto & Walter, 2000, in Campbell & La Pastina (eds) 2010 p. 429-36). By stylising the image in a cartoon-like font and then juxtaposing it by embedding two capital fonts and then layering a tag-line below in capitals, the image is entertainingly ambiguous. The capitals are authoritative and commanding but are mockingly toned down by the larger more dominant uncapitalised (cartoon-style) font. The juxtaposition of both fonts creates a humorous banter within the image that carries with it a subtle invitation to join in the fun by participating in a group. The capital letters shout out, yet remain restrained by the light but ambiguous banter of the image itself. The faint background image of ‘Burger Fuel’ offers another narrative suggestion: LifeGroup offers fast-food sustenance for the soul.



Figure 1

Lastly, images re-distribute power. Kress (2010) highlights this challenge in voicing concern about the policing and control of this new language. He notes that once visual communication was spoken and developed in centres of high culture, but that “the dominant visual language is now controlled by the global cultural/technological

empires of mass media, which disseminate the examples set by exemplary designers and, through the spread of image banks and computer-imaging technology, exert a 'normalizing' rather than explicitly 'normative' influence on visual communication across the world"(Kress 2010, p. 5). This has resulted in the redistribution of power around the politics of style. This new map is about design that rests on the possibility of choice. In this environment, communication is dictated to by market-controlled principles of choice that call for individual discretion and entitlement. This leverages personal preference at the expense of those values that solidify a community. This is significant for religious communities and, in particular, I would argue those within a Pentecostal tradition. Moreover, if it is a high absorption of popular culture is a characteristic of Pentecostalism, does this make individual Pentecostal congregations vulnerable to the consumptive currents that swirl at will within the day-to-day market-driven context of daily life?

In response to this question the second half of this essay discusses data gathered from my research on Elim Christian Centre, (EE). The specific question in regard to this research was, to what extent are visual technologies shaping a Pentecostal ecclesia and the behavioural patterns of its participants? The material is arranged under two headings: Firstly, the organisation and its life, and secondly, congregant perceptions and the effect of visual technologies.

A Summary Discussion of the Research

The Organisation and its Life

Two reoccurring themes were noted when observing Sunday services and interviewing senior leadership and the design team: They were firstly, the energy and effort put into visual technology, and secondly, the fluid and overly casual structure in which those who direct EE's visual media function.

Energy and Effort: The energy and effort put into visual technology were firstly noted in the Sunday services. Each of the three services in morning were "seeker driven" and tightly managed. Visitors received promotional material and experienced a seamless flow of contemporary music and song, which was capped off with a positive message of hope. Each element seemed effortless. Three larger-than-life projector screens hung over the stage. They were alive throughout with digitalised images of the stage area: inclusive of the worship band, a superbly produced series of infomercials, and an informally dressed pastor as host. In addition, I noted three close-circuit wide flat-screen TVs strategically located towards the back of the auditorium; each ensuring congregants had stage visibility of the worship band, host and preacher. A sophisticated arrangement of lighting worked the stage area. This stepped up a notch when beams of coloured light pierced the white mist piping from a hidden smoke machine. Juxtaposed to these multi-sensory elements was the simplicity of the auditorium itself. The overall experience was impressive, entertaining and not out of sync with images encountered in common public spaces (e.g., viewed through TV/internet, at a rock concert or in a shopping mall).

The sophistication, preparation and expertise needed to construct this level of performance each week requires of the organisation a considerable commitment of its resources. This level of effort is well reasoned however, given EE's mantra towards unchurched people: "do whatever it takes to get people saved." This translates into methodologies where attracting people (both unchurched and churched) become a matter of executing the most effective techniques. In EE's arsenal of proven strategies is

impression management. However, EE's efforts to create an appealing public persona, does raise some concern as to the effects this may have upon congregants. The use of technology can and does reshape social behaviour. This is demonstrated by Heidi Campbell (2010) where she investigates various faith communities in relation to their use of new media. She argues that religious communities are shaped by technology but are not necessarily passive users – much depends on the kind of choices those communities make about new media. The accessibility of visual technology coupled with its power to persuade congregants arguably tips the balance of thinking and acting towards a more pragmatic approach to ministry. The language of congregational life is re-framed around practical impulses of “what works is good”. As Paul Metzger (2007) observes, “In a free market church culture those who cater most to [the wants of consumers] thrive the best” (p. 40). This deepening reliance upon market methodologies to rally congregants subjugates the need for those practices that deeply form congregants in the virtues of the Christian tradition.

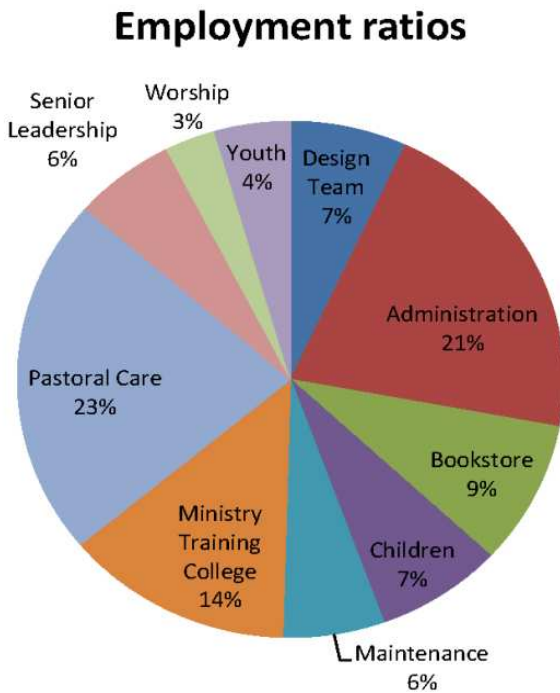
Also noted were the specialized staff and resources allocated to visual media. This consisted of two full time employed staff (FTEs), one with a Fine Arts degree and the other a degree in digital animation. An example of the expertise and sophistication observed is noted in the development of the ‘LifeGroup’ symbol (Figure 1.), and the energy that went into the actual image and then into the promotion of the image as a concept. The detail was revealing. Font shape, colour and background music were meticulously integrated to awaken the senses and persuade congregants to join a LifeGroup.

The interviews also indicated the effort expended to create the proliferation of graphic images, particularly in the way they communicate the character of the organisation: to be vibrant and dynamic, extensive, accessible, alive with activity, and memorable. No less than twenty five brochures, booklets and leaflets were displayed on the information stand that greets visitors on their arrival to the church. The literature promoting particular ministries was even more striking. Each had its own distinctive brand and, in some cases, carried a tagline. These images were replicated not only in hard copy on all forms of literature but in soft copy through a variety of digital mediums: website, DVD promotions and Sunday advertisement clips.

The proliferation of these images in their various forms demonstrates a commitment to work visual media, that is to ensure a level of novelty and freshness are constantly maintained. It could also be argued that these two elements – visual novelty and the need for freshness – are mutually inclusive. Each feeds off the other to create a combustible environment of activity. The sense of gratification is mutually shared. Congregants are energised by the visible choice of activities while the organisation is able to capitalise on their enthusiasm. This exchange increases the cultural capital of the organisation, enabling it to consolidate its identity and further promote its programs.

In EE's deployment of images, one reoccurring theme is evident: branding (Einstein 2007). The fingerprints of branding are evident across a whole range of EE's ministries. An example of this is the categorisation of age into specific groups. The logic is understandable as branding creates a memorable sign for consumers. They do not have to intentionally think about a product's attributes. As Einstein (2007) states, "the name or the logo appears and everything that is associated with that brand, comes to mind" (p. 12). The development of brands by EE has become an effective tool in the creation of specific identities. While income figures are outside the parameters of this research, a measurement of Full Time employee (FTE) ratios does give a glimpse of where the organisation is putting its energy (Table 1).

Table 1 Full Time Employment (FTE) Ratios



Process, Structure and decision-making: The second significant theme noted in regard to the organisation was the fluid and overly casual structure in which those who direct EE's visual media function. Two characteristics were evident. Firstly, a high level of level of pragmatism guided the inner logic of the organisation. The design team not only provided the graphic input but exercised visual discernment and decision-making discretion on image content, editing and the marketing of EE's identity and activities. The second (and subsequent) characteristic was influences of a secular nature which were unwittingly feeding into the organisation.

Secular influences framed the content and direction of EE's visual media. For the most part, these went undetected because they were nestled in the detail, camouflaged by the novelty of embracing the latest trend. This makes it difficult to unravel and name the unwanted element, because the lines between what is Christian and what is secular are often blurred by the use of technology. This is compounded further by a familiar discourse, which argues that "the means justifies the end," or the means is justified when its purpose is about achieving the greater good. For EE, reaching the unchurched and increasing church attendance is "the greater good". This goal is paramount.

The development of a branding guide by the design team is one such outworking. It is a comprehensive twenty-seven-page document that outlines and directs the visual landscape of EE. This is to ensure EE visual identity remains consistent and congruent with its corporate values and beliefs. Less reassuring, however, is the unmonitored discretion given to the design team in determining the suitability of an image. Of note in the branding guide is the statement, "God is constant but how God is represented can change with generations." The theological inference of this statement is significant and yet problematic. The design team become the church's freelance theologians who decide what images best represent God to the various groups.

This is expressed in the dichotomy made by the design team between internal and external images. If Christian images of any kind were to be used they were to be for internal viewing by a Christian audience over and against an external viewing by a non-Christian audience. Images deemed appropriate for external use were those considered to be plausible within the public domain – secular in nature. The reasoning behind this move is rooted deep in a desire to reach the “lost”. This was voiced as, *“I would rather make sure I am hitting the mark for the unchurched person than another Christian.”* It was a remark possibly guided by several underlying assumptions: 1) Christian images may work for believers but this is not our priority; 2) Christian images are not readily understood by those outside of the church; and 3) Secular images are relevant and effective tools to reach the unchurched. The force of these ideas coupled with EE’s sense of purpose, means secular images are expedient, a logical choice. Expressed as *“We are not afraid to use whatever we can to make sure the message gets out.”*

The influence of marketing theories and advertising practices were clearly evident in EE’s visuals. These were observed in the navigational instruments used by the design team. They provided direction and ultimately underpinned many aspects of the design and delivery process. Embedded within these instruments are secular values and beliefs which, when used, call for certain epistemological commitments.

On a *functional* level the design team is able to excite congregants, even convince them to participate in EE’s programs and activities with some certainty of success. However, at a *symbolic* level, given the absence of structures able to critically evaluate the shape and value-content of visual media, there is less certainty about the measurable effects of visual media upon congregant identity. Ever present is the possibility that other values and ideas contrary to those of the organisation escape notice and become embedded in the same visual promotion. The ambiguity that results creates a two-tiered message. At face value, the intent of the message is explicit, yet there lies at a deeper level more fluid messages about identity and consumer sovereignty. These more implicit messages are heard through the convergence of those themes, elements and connotations that surround and go into a visual promotion. Layered together, these ideas combine to signal a less obvious, but equally powerful, set of claims about Christian faith (e.g., the gospel is for those who are good looking and young, and being Christian is about being contemporary). These claims and others create ambiguity, which can be subversive. It is this subversive element I would argue goes unnoticed by EE and by those in leadership because the culture of the organisation, blinded by its own internal logic, does not appear to be conversant with the kind of processes needed to critically filter those values and beliefs that are contrary to its own and the gospel of Christ. While this internal logic offers pragmatic and strategic insights on visual media that are beneficial, it also makes EE vulnerable to corrosive elements of consumer culture, which may lie embedded within the actual practices and processes of the design team.

Congregant Perceptions and the Effects of Visual Technologies

In this element of the research, two themes were evident. The first is the positive vibe participants felt towards EE. This was particularly evident in the way advertising was able shape the imagination and point desire. An example of this was the way in which advertising was used to re-envision EE’s small group ministry. As noted earlier, small groups were re-branded as LifeGroups. Its promotion effectively stimulated fresh interest and persuaded congregants to join up. Responses ranged from “I want to participate” to “Every time I see the LifeGroup ad I feel I need to get involved.”

The second theme was the muted responses, which I have labelled as signs of dissonance. While the data highlighted the overall effectiveness of visual media and EE's employment of visual technologies, the data also revealed some dissonance towards aspects of their use. These responses included 1) feelings of incongruity and confusion around particular visual representations of identity; and 2) feelings of uncertainty-to-distrust around some visual presentations and their failure to deliver on the claims that had been made.

Feelings of incongruity and confusion were expressed when interviewees were shown the front page of EE's website and an image representing EE as a multi-ethnic and inter-generational church community. All acknowledged the validity of the image as a true representation of EE. However, each interviewee voiced a degree of incongruity about the stock photos used in the visual.

Feelings of uncertainty and distrust were expressed around some of the advertising that was loaded with visual imperatives claiming certain outcomes. Concern was expressed that some claims were exaggerations of reality while others were simply misleading. This raised questions of integrity for interviewees concerning EE, who saw a gap between the claims made and reality.

A more intense level of ambivalence surfaced when, in the focus-group interview, discussion broke out around the use of secular imagery and the use of Christian imagery. The kernel of the discussion centred on the appropriate setting of each. While participants strongly identified with the cross as an image, they were reluctant, even resistant, to using Christian images within a secular setting. A sharp dichotomy emerged around the appropriateness of secular images and inappropriateness of Christian symbols. The group argued that secular images were the most appropriate means of communicating the Christian message to those outside EE, while Christian imagery had a place inside the church.

This draws attention to the affective influence of images in the production of meaning. In this respect, the positivity of participants towards EE is a reciprocation of culture, a culture EE has promoted through its use of images. This is significant given that "communication is a quintessentially a social activity" (Kress 2010), which frames culture. Comments ranged from: "they just took stock images ... surely it would have been better if they had used people from the church" to "it's just a marketing ploy." Similar responses were repeatedly stated throughout. Some interviewees expressed confusion. One responded by saying "it bothers me that the images of people represented in this visual don't go to the church. It would mean more to me if I could identify the faces." Confusion seemed to compound around the ambiguity of the visual and its claim, especially in view of the inscription "You are invited" (which is located in the centre of the image) and its association with the photos. In other words, through visual media and the use of particular images EE is able to effectively (re)construct the social ground, the social relations and social environment according to its mandate. By choosing images and fashioning various modes of communication in ways that celebrate positivity, EE is able to create a plausible structure where positivity is a marker of belonging. This is not morally wrong, but it does raise questions about the formation of congregant identity and the process of communication as politically problematic (Kress 2010).

Another concern was the ambivalent attitude of interviewees towards Christian images. While all interviewees strongly identified with 'the cross' as a significant

Christian symbol, most felt EE's decision to use secular images over Christian images to market itself and promote its message to the wider community completely plausible. Moreover, it was felt Christian images would misrepresent EE in the marketplace on the basis that such images would likely be associated with traditional Christianity; something EE is keen to distance itself from in view of its commitment to "being contemporary." While, on the surface, this orientation seemed credible, it was not entirely consistent with views expressed by those interviewed. The ambiguity expressed in the notion that Christian images should be part of the inner life of the church, but not used outwardly when communicating with the public, is a perspective framed by a modernist narrative (Hiebert 2008).

This narrative (or modernist paradigm) was evident in the differentiation made by EE in regard to the plausibility of secular images over the implausibility of Christian images in the public domain; hence, the subjugation of Christian images for secular images. The result of this split upon those interviewed was a fragmented consciousness. On one hand, they felt Christian images were important for discipleship, but on the other hand were disposed to a dualism that relegated these images to one's private world of personal belief. While interviewees felt that Christian images were important, there was not a common language to speak of that expressed a communal belief in the Christian story, other than contemporary images EE used to communicate faith in the public domain. This loss undercuts the richness of the Christian story and its historical significance. Furthermore, it invokes a paralysis of congregant proclamation because there is not a shared language in which to speak about the mystery of the gospel in Christ. With the collapse of modernity and the emergence of postmodern themes, the relegation of Christian images to the margins seems misguided.

Conclusion

I have argued that the risk for Pentecostal congregations, such as EE, in adopting the strategies of the advertising world is that their congregations will end up adopting the values of the advertising world without knowing it is happening, (which is consistent with Torma & Teusner 2011). I have also argued that in the public domain of New Zealand, culture is driven by a consumptive vision framed by capitalist ideals in which advertising actively works on our imaginary world through its relentless promotion of compelling images pointing to a beautiful life; its gospel message is salvation by consumption.

The danger of this narrative for EE is that an embodied "know-how", is absorbed through the use of advertising techniques in the production of visual media. This potentially diminishes the significance of the Christian story and congregational life to commodified objects around which particular images have precedent over others. This is done by branding church life and practices (that are relationally configured) into specific objects emptied of their subjective value. These are marketed in increasingly sophisticated ways, so as to attract not just congregants but also an unchurched audience. Within this schema, anonymity and choice are assured, which are prerequisites of consumerist cultures. While these values might be something celebrated within popular culture, cultivating a congregant culture that indirectly promotes a social framework geared to consumer choice through advertising is less reassuring, especially when the desire of the organisation is unashamedly the proclamation of the gospel and an alternative way of life. This posture suggests EE is not fully aware of the host culture in which it seeks to reach, nor the degree to which the host culture itself may be influencing its own ecclesial identity and behaviour.

This is problematic for EE for a number of reasons. Firstly, the gospel cannot be reduced to market-size bits and allocated a consumptive value, especially if it is to challenge the beliefs of a consumerist system. Secondly, the Christian story loses its scope, as well as its capacity to re-tell its own story, if its language is flattened out to fit the prejudices of a cultural paradigm championing its own good-news message.

If I am right in arguing that language does matter in respect of a community's identity, it follows that the practice of Christian faith must remain faithful to its own linguistic structures. Such faithfulness does not mean cultural irrelevance but rather, in contrast, the creation and communication "of new signs that provoke people to think in new ways about ancient truth" (Downing 2012, p. 30.) If the gospel becomes confined to the smallness of the latest trend and advertorial images judged to be appealing, it risks losing its imaginary power for otherness; meaning Christian practices and virtues no longer appear other-worldly. The images used can only ever anticipate an imminent reality. This is because the transcendence of the message collapses into a world given to secular signs that are unable to grasp the eschatological significance of the gospel. Without a language and a "social imaginary" (Smith 2009, p. 65-66) to see and speak of Christian community as a people living in anticipation of God's kingdom in the present, Christian faith and its good-news story become prisoners to the surrounding culture.

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