

Myths about Communicating Congregational Identity

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by Lynne M. Baab

Conveying a congregation's identity and values clearly and through a variety of means of communication will help the congregation connect to the community around it. At the same time, clear expressions of values and identity will also have a deep impact on the congregation itself. The people involved in a congregation are shaped by what they hear about that congregation. Their expectations for the life of faith and for their involvement in the community are influenced by the ways in which the congregation talks about itself and its values.

For decades congregational leaders have been making decisions—both consciously and unconsciously—about identity and values and how they are communicated. The nine myths below lay out some of the underlying issues that may influence these choices and their effectiveness.

Myth 1: We've got a mission statement, so we've figured out who we are.

Mission (or vision) statements can be helpful to congregations in expressing who they are and what they care about. Leaders and members are tempted to believe that once a mission statement is in place, the congregation can get on with doing ministry. A mission statement, however, is simply one small way among many that a congregation can communicate its heart and soul. In fact, everything about a congregation communicates. Its bulletin, newsletter, and website may include its mission statement, but the photos, layout, and additional text also contribute to the reader's perception of who the congregation is. The actions of a congregation—its worship style, preaching, ministries, and mission activities—speak of its DNA, its story. Because of its power to influence, all of the congregation's communication needs to be evaluated from time to time to see if it reflects the values and identity of the congregation.

Myth 2: Our identity is rooted in our faith.

Leaders and members are tempted to believe they don't need to spend time considering the specific identity of their congregation because they assume their faith values provide the DNA for their congregation. And it is absolutely true that in communities of faith, identity comes primarily from the congregation's faith tradition. Faith communities are not businesses or other organizations that need to create an identity from scratch. However, in the same way that individuals within

any faith tradition bring specific gifts in service, so faith communities have particular values and emphases. One might have a strong commitment to justice, another to outreach within the local community, and another to ministry with seniors or teenagers or adoptive families. Sometimes it appears that megachurches can do it all, so congregational leaders might think their congregation should do everything, too. But even megachurches have particular emphases and priorities.

Myth 3: If we focus too much on figuring out our own identity, we may become self-absorbed.

This is another statement with some truth to it, but not the whole truth. Congregational identity is only part of what congregational leaders should be attending to. While focusing on it all the time would definitely cause an imbalance, many congregations are already out of balance in that they focus too little on the way their actions, publications, and use of symbols communicate their priorities and the distinctiveness of who they are. “Who are we and what are we about?” is a key question that needs to be front and center for all congregations.

Myth 4: We don’t need to think any further about the implications of new communication technology because we already use it well.

A number of congregations have mastered necessary skills related to new forms of communication in admirable ways. Many congregations offer podcasted and streaming video sermons on websites, have wonderful teams of people who run the data projectors on Sunday morning, and embrace new communication technologies as they emerge. But that doesn’t mean they are communicating wisely. In some congregations, the message communicated about values differs from one mode of communication to the next because the various forms of communication haven’t been evaluated well. In other congregations, the message is so unified that the congregation’s diversity is not represented well. Focusing on the deeper questions, the issues that lie behind the use of new technologies, is important. Congregational leaders need to consider how everything the congregation does—communication technologies as well as things like programming and the use of physical space in the building—speaks about the congregation’s priorities.

Myth 5: We’re a traditional congregation, and we have chosen not to use most of the new communication technologies. We’ve figured out our identity; it’s the same as it’s always been, so why complicate things?

All congregations need to periodically rethink and explore who they are and what they value. Even if all the people attending a congregation stay the same over a decade, each of those people would undergo personal changes in that time, and those personal changes would change the priorities and emphases of that community of faith. And, of course, no congregation is composed of exactly the same members over a decade or more. The flow of people in and out of a congregation, and in and out of leadership roles, shapes the values of each congregation. And while I do think new communication technologies offer some

wonderful opportunities for congregations, I would never suggest that congregations need to use all of them. I do argue, however, that everything congregations say and do contributes to their identity. Therefore paying some attention to the issue is wise, no matter what forms of communication are used.

Myth 6: We avoid the new technologies because we're leery of the consumer culture, and we don't want our congregation and even our faith to turn into yet one more consumer item.

I am concerned that communities of faith have become consumer items and that people looking for a congregation are engaged in a form of shopping. However, I see congregational identity as an issue that relates to much more than selling something. Very simply, everything we say and do communicates what we consider to be important, and what congregations communicate about faith values shapes how members act on their faith. Therefore, from time to time, congregations need to stop and evaluate what they are communicating. Congregational leaders will likely choose not to use certain forms of communication that don't fit the ethos of that congregation.

Myth 7: Our congregational values are being communicated effectively through words. Our pastor and leaders preach the sermons and put a lot of thought into the words used in our newsletter and on our website.

People are increasingly influenced by images as well as by words. According to communication research, the images projected on a screen during worship and the images used in newsletters and on websites often have as much or more impact than the words associated with them. Much of Jewish and Christian tradition is strongly word oriented, emphasizing the significance of words over images. With the move away from a word-based to an image-based culture, leaders of congregations need to do some careful thinking about the role of visual communication in our time.

Myth 8: We've got a great Web designer and newsletter editor, and our newsletter and website are terrific.

In many congregations, one person creates most of the publications. Often, congregational leaders supply the text, but the Web designer or newsletter editor decides on the layout, photos, and graphics. In this increasingly visual culture, forms of visual communication such as layout, photos, and graphics need to be evaluated to see if they communicate the desired message, particularly if one person is choosing most of them. I believe that all the new communication technologies have created the necessity for "critical friends," people who understand the importance of the new forms of communication for congregations and, at the same time, are willing to look at those forms with a critical eye. These critical friends pay attention to the congregation's websites, blogs, projection screens, and other forms of communication that have a large visual component to

see if the visuals harmonize with the words used and whether the verbal and visual components together communicate important values about the congregation.

Myth 9: If your heart is in the right place, communication takes care of itself.

I agree that the single most important thing for congregations is to worship and follow God in a way that engages hearts and minds. Without faith as the center of its life, a congregation has nothing to offer its members or the world. Faith values cannot be communicated if no faith values are present. But I do not agree that the result of a vibrant faith is that all communication will automatically be okay. Just as individuals with good intentions can benefit from learning listening skills for their personal relationships and speaking skills for their oral communication, so congregations can benefit from considering the implications of the ways they communicate and what they are communicating. In this age of rapidly proliferating communication technologies, this task of evaluation is even more urgent.

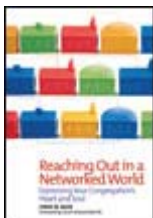
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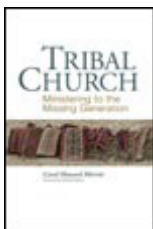
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[Reaching Out in a Networked World: Expressing Your Congregation's Heart and Soul](#) by Lynne M. Baab

A congregation communicates its heart and soul through words, photos, actions, programs, architecture, decor, the arts, and countless other aspects of congregational life. In *Reaching Out in a Networked*

World, communications expert and pastor Lynne Baab examines technologies such as websites, blogs, online communities, and desktop publishing. She demonstrates how a congregation can evaluate these tools and appropriately use them to communicate its heart and soul, to convey its identity and values both within and outside the congregation. When congregations are intentional about communicating who they are and what they value, people in the wider community can get a clear and coherent picture of the congregation and its mission.



[Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation](#) by Carol Howard Merritt

Carol Howard Merritt, a pastor in her mid-thirties, suggests a different way for churches to approach young adults on their own terms. Outlining the financial, social, and familial situations that affect many young adults today, she describes how churches can provide a safe, supportive place for young adults to nurture relationships and foster spiritual growth.



[40 Days and 40 Bytes: Making Computers Work for Your Congregation](#) by Aaron Spiegel, Nancy Armstrong, and Brent Bill

40 Days and 40 Bytes will help your congregation explore technology so you can decide, from a ministry and culture standpoint, what you need to do. The goal: godly service—not technological glitz. There’s no question your congregation is going to use computer technology. The only question is, “how?” Spiegel, Armstrong, and Bill will help you design technology that fits your ministry and mission.

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