

**Visual Technologies
and
the (re)shaping of a Pentecostal Ecclesia**

(MINX 590)

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Abstract

The use of visual technology has become a significant medium of communication for churches in New Zealand. Its accessibility, coupled with market forces that rely on advertising to attract congregants, means some churches have increasingly felt the need to adapt, even adopt, secular practices to appear contemporary and thereby offer a culturally relevant message. Pentecostal churches are some of the most adept at utilising and absorbing these visual technologies into their own organisational systems. This is particularly evident amongst large Pentecostal churches, which put a lot of effort and energy into impression management. The aim of this project is to ask: in New Zealand, to what extent are these visual technologies shaping a Pentecostal ecclesia and the behavioural patterns of its participants? This research acknowledges the emergence of visual culture and the importance of images. It explores the role of images and how advertising uses visual technologies, promoting particular consumptive ideals in the process.

I explore these issues by examining data gathered through interviews and observation from Elim Christian Centre – East (EE). The thesis argues that while EE is very effective in communicating its identity and vision, its absorption of advertising practices makes it vulnerable to forces contrary to the gospel, which may in time undermine the integrity of its own vision. Further, I argue that, in adopting the strategies of the advertising world, the congregation of EE will likely end up adopting the values of the advertising world without knowing it is happening. I use semiotic and consumption theory to explore these concerns, and I make recommendations to the congregation towards a more considered approach.

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Acknowledgments

This work is a snapshot of a large Pentecostal church and its use of visual technology. Inspiration for this project came out of my reflections over several years as a Pentecostal pastor who was thinking about the significance that church culture and the influences of popular culture – namely consumerism and visual media – might have upon congregants and congregational life. This piece of research reflects this journey.

On a personal level, this could not have been accomplished without the love and support of my wife Linda who uncomplainingly made space, gave encouragement, and gave input in the final stages. I would also like to acknowledge my supervisor Lynne Baab, whose input and direction was both pivotal and inspirational. I am grateful for her robust comments, astute supervision and eye for overall coherence.

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List of Abbreviations

ECC	Elim Christian Centre
EE	Elim East
FTE	Full-time Employment
NZ	New Zealand

Introduction

Pentecostal congregations in New Zealand (NZ) today are amongst some of the biggest and most visible church gatherings in the country.¹ This reality was inconceivable fifty years ago² when mainline churches (along with their dissenting counterparts, which included Baptist, Brethren and The Salvation Army) enjoyed a loyal constituency of followers.³ 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.

For Pentecostal churches, the familiar tag-lines of "being relevant" and "being contemporary", have emerged as influential texts within the tradition.⁴ 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

¹ Life Church in Auckland boasts a membership of 8,000.

² Knowles argues that "the small size of the [Pentecostal] movement reflected its sectarian status, although this was to change markedly in the late 1950's." B. Knowles, "New Zealand," *Encyclopedia of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess (London: Routledge, 2006), 188. Further to this Ward comments: "Pentecostal churches such as the Assemblies of God and Apostolic Church were small, and in 1961 claimed only 3059 on census returns, a mere 0.12% of the population. By 1966 this had doubled and by 1991 stood at 51,768, representing 1.56%." Kevin Ward, "The Charismatic Movement in New Zealand: Sovereign move of God or cultural captivity of the gospel?" Paper presented at the Systematic Theology Association of Aotearoa New Zealand Conference, Dunedin, October 2011.

³ Religious professions within the denominations are consistent until 1971. In the following years there is a decline matched by growth within Pentecostal churches. Allan K. Davidson & Peter J. Lineham, *Transplanted Christianity* (Auckland: College Communications, 1987), 314.

⁴ Three out of the four largest Pentecostal Churches in Auckland surveyed have the words "relevant" or "contemporary" in either their vision or mission statements. Elim Christian Centre. <<http://www.elimchristiancentre.org.nz/about-elim.html>> (19 Feb. 2013); Life Church. <<http://lifenz.org/about/missionvisionvalues.html>> (19 Feb. 2013); Equippers Church. <<http://auckland.equipperschurch.com/about-us/mission-and-vision.html>> (19 Feb. 2013); City Impact Church. <<http://www.cityimpactchurch.com/northshore/who-we-are/vision.html>> (19 Feb. 2013).

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.⁵ This is because they quickly adopt technology as a relevant and effective means to communicate their identity and get their message out into the public domain.

The absorption of these technologies may come at a cost however, especially if the values that are embedded in their use prove to be contrary to the gospel and go undetected. Arguably, larger Pentecostal churches are more adept than most at embracing these technologies due to their resourcefulness. The rhetoric of being relevant and the desire to communicate in a contemporary fashion are powerful drivers in the acquisition of cutting-edge technologies, especially those of a visual nature. This is particularly so if the application of such technology proves effective as a means of promoting a congregation's public profile and attracting new members. Is there need for caution and reflection? Is more being communicated than simply the explicit message projected digitally onto a big screen? More to the point, to what extent in NZ are visual technologies shaping a Pentecostal ecclesia and its participants?

To explore this question, I argue that visual technologies currently play a significant role within large Pentecostal church organisations. The example I use is Elim Christian Centre – East (EE), which is a large Pentecostal church located in the eastern suburbs of Auckland. EE's use of visual technology is extensive. Its leaders believe that the message of the church and Jesus Christ should be packaged in a relevant and contemporary way. The use of visual technology enables the organisation to achieve this goal. As it is important to understand the nature of a Pentecostal church, the opening chapter maps a brief history of Pentecostalism and its congregational growth within NZ. Key themes are identified, which provide an understanding of this movement and those forces that could explain the motivation of Pentecostal churches as eager consumers of new technology. In Chapter 2 I explore the notion of

⁵ 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.” Robert G. Dunn, *Identifying Consumption: Subjects and Objects in Consumer Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 8.

contemporary culture and the significance of images in a society increasingly geared towards visual communication. Links are made between the use of visual technology, advertising and consumer culture. This is followed by a brief description outlining the process taken with EE and the method of research. Chapters 3 and 4 examine data drawn from key interviews, both with those who lead EE, as well as those who direct the visual design process. Chapter 5 explores data gathered from numerous congregant interviews and identifies various threads of influence. In Chapter 6, I summarise my findings and conclude with several recommendations.

Chapter 1: A history of Pentecostal churches and their growth in New Zealand

To get a perspective on the priorities and commitments a Pentecostal church typically might embrace, it is helpful to track the development of Pentecostalism both in NZ and more generically abroad. In the following paragraphs, a brief survey of Pentecostalism within NZ provides a helpful lens through which to view the current context of this tradition. Also, the survey helps to explain the readiness of individual churches to embrace contemporary modes of communication.

Pentecostalism emerged in NZ in the early 1920s. It began as a watershed movement of a revival linked to the visit of Smith Wigglesworth in 1922.⁶ While largely unadvertised, his meetings in Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin were well attended; growing to 3,000 people in Wellington by the third evening.⁷ The following two decades were less spectacular.⁸ While there was a steady growth across the country of small congregations, their presence in the public domain remained largely isolated; considered to be 'fringe' by mainline churches and treated with disdain by free-church leaders. Knowles captures the context of the time by commenting: "Up until the late 1950's Pentecostal churches were small and largely sectarian groups scattered throughout the country."⁹

By the 1960s, religious attitudes throughout NZ had begun to shift.¹⁰ This was due in part to the counter-culture revolution of the 1960s and 1970s where a more existential

⁶ Allan Davidson, *Christianity in Aotearoa: A History of Church and Society in New Zealand* (Wellington: The New Zealand Education for Ministry Board, 1997), 107.

⁷ It may have been the various criticisms made in the press of Smith Wigglesworth that actually increased his public profile. James Worsfold notes that "in Christchurch ... secular and religious criticisms came right out in the open." James Worsfold, *A History of the Charismatic Movements in New Zealand* (West Yorkshire, England: Julian Literature Trust, 1974), 115.

⁸ The national census of 1926 identified 726 people as Pentecostal (representing 0.05% of 1.34 million). By 1951, this was 0.12% (2367) of the total population and grew over the next 10 years (noted in 1961 census as 0.17% of the total population of 2,414,984 persons). Ian Clark, *Pentecost at the Ends of the Earth: A History of the Assemblies of God in New Zealand (1927-2003)* (Blenheim, New Zealand: Christian Road Ministries, 2007), 29, 75, 105.

⁹ Brett Knowles, "New Zealand," *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess and Edward M. van der Maas (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2002), 188.

¹⁰ Allan Davidson, *Christianity in Aotearoa*, 171.

encounter of religion was sought.¹¹ This had a remarkable effect on the religious landscape of NZ. From the late fifties and through the 1960s, partly encouraged by the Billy Graham crusade of 1959, and further inspired by models of U.S. Pentecostal entrepreneurial enterprise, local Pentecostal groups began to move increasingly from religious obscurity into the public eye of popular as well as religious culture. In Knowles' survey of the NZ Pentecostal movement, he writes: "[B]y 1972 the Pentecostal movement was becoming a significant force in N.Z. Christianity."¹²

The impetus that helped foster public awareness, and more latterly, acceptance of Pentecostalism throughout the 1960s, was characterised by young entrepreneurial Pentecostal leaders.¹³ These leaders enthusiastically embraced the challenges of societal change and seized the opportunity to get their message out by using every available means.¹⁴ This meant: advertising in local newspapers, conducting sometimes ambitious evangelistic-healing crusades in public spaces, and lobbying successive governments for the rights to broadcast Christian Radio.¹⁵ While retaining the revivalist theme of classical Pentecostalism, the readiness of young entrepreneurial Pentecostals to push the boundaries and adopt contemporary mediums to evangelise

¹¹ Allan Davidson points out that changes in popular culture were absorbed by the church at large through Pentecostal and charismatic influences. He states, "[this is] seen particularly in music, but also in the greater informality and openness in personal relationships." He goes on to note, "While faith was certainly awakened for some, the impact of religious pluralism and secularisation in New Zealand life continued to be significant." *Ibid.*, 172-3.

¹² Knowles, "New Zealand," 188. Clark notes: "In terms of the New Zealand Population of 2.8 million [1976] the 13,944 Associated Pentecostals represented just under half of one percent." Clark, *Pentecost at the Ends of the Earth*, 163.

¹³ Rob Wheeler, who was inspired by American healing evangelist Tommy Hick, started tent meetings in 1959; Frank Houston (father of Brian Houston of Hillsong fame) became the national superintendent for Assemblies of God New Zealand and conducted revival campaigns throughout the country from 1965 until he moved to Australia in the late 1970s. Dick Berry, founder of Radio Rhema Broadcasting, began to campaign for Christian radio in 1965.

¹⁴ One of these young entrepreneurial leaders, Frank Houston, is noted by Ian Clark who states, "It would be fair to say that it was due largely to Pastor Frank Houston's extensive campaigning that for the first time [1960] in decades the Assemblies of God developed a credible evangelistic outreach that gathered force in the following fifteen years and helped propel a formerly obscure Pentecostal group to the forefront of the Charismatic Movement in New Zealand." Clark, *Pentecost at the Ends of the Earth*, 104.

¹⁵ Brett Knowles mentions in his history of the New Life Churches a number of young Pentecostal leaders who held evangelistic healing crusades in prominent public places. Ron Cody conducted numerous rallies throughout the South Island, one being a large "One Thousand Souls for Christ Crusade" held in the Nelson Cotton Mill at the end of 1962. Rob Wheeler, who held tent campaigns, hosted one in Western Springs, Auckland, January 1962. Brett Knowles, *New Life: A History of the New Life Churches* (Dunedin: Third Millennium, 1999), 64.

is significant.¹⁶ It is likely that this kind of leadership created a benchmark and a platform for a future generation of leaders to aspire to and follow.

By the mid 1970s, Pentecostal churches in NZ were gaining some level of respectability.¹⁷ Their eagerness to “reach the lost”, motivated out of a sense of mission, gave further urgency to voices within the tradition calling for greater relevancy and the adoption of new technologies and contemporary trends. Linda Flett in her thesis on “Proclaiming the Gospel in New Zealand” attributes the Church Growth Movement, founded by Donald McGavran, as having a significant role in the growth of Pentecostal churches in NZ. She goes on to argue that the appeal of the Church Growth Movement lay in its “approach [as] essentially pragmatic and flexible.”¹⁸ The Church Growth Movement thus provided the ideological base from which this young movement could grow and expand its influence.¹⁹ It proved a fitting marriage.²⁰ Pentecostal church leaders were now able to speak about mission and the local church within the same narrative frame. Moreover, the rhetoric of the Church Growth Movement provided a language that was able to harness not only the fruits of social science, but also the wonders of technology, especially in realm of communication. Technology came to be viewed as an instrument given by God to use in service of fulfilling the Great Commission. Furthermore, Pentecostal churches were able to leverage their position by utilising an array of contemporary mediums to enhance appearance and communicate a sense of relevancy. The emergence of Hillsong in Australia under the leadership Pastor Brian Houston in the late 1980s epitomised this use of technology. Their influence was to have a major influence not only on church music but in the way churches, especially Pentecostal churches in NZ from the 1990s

¹⁶ Brett Knowles, “New Zealand,” *Encyclopedia of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*, 188.

¹⁷ Ian Clark comments: “The Charismatic Movement in New Zealand was really gaining momentum, and many Christians from historical churches, hungry for more of the Holy Spirit, began to visit Pentecostal churches in large numbers.” Clark, *Pentecost at the Ends of the Earth*, 130. Also see Brett Knowles, *New Life*, 159-60.

¹⁸ Linda Flett, *Proclaiming the Gospel in New Zealand: An Examination of the Message and Methods of the Assemblies of God and Elim Churches from 1990-2008* (MTh Thesis, Auckland: Laidlaw Graduate School of Theology, 2011), 64.

¹⁹ The 1986 census revealed Pentecostals represented 0.94% of the total population of 3,263,283. Clark, *Pentecost at the Ends of the Earth*, 197.

²⁰ Mara Einstein comments that “a fundamental idea behind the Church Growth Movement was one of marketing (though again they did not call it that): use psychology, sociology, and anthropology to create a message that will appeal to your audience and you will ultimately grow your church.” Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (London: Routledge, 2007), 62.

onwards, have benchmarked themselves and sought to project their image in the public domain.

Today, Pentecostal churches in NZ are not the marginalised pockets of people they once were. In the national census of the new millennium held in March 2001, Pentecostals represented 1.94% of just on 3.5 million.²¹ Ten years on, a notable proportion of the largest churches in the country are Pentecostal.²² These are envied by an older generation of church goers and their leaders for their display of technological expertise and sophistication. They are no longer “the loony fringe” hidden in a small out-of-the-way hall, but are now highly visible.²³ This visibility is not configured by the architecture of the buildings, but rather by the flair of a visual animator or graphic artist in a side room who produces digitally-enhanced images for a Sunday advertising clip or a high-end interactive portal keyed to a church website. These large Pentecostal churches are possibly perceived and envied by older and declining ecclesial bodies as cornering the market on the modern church. This is evident by virtue of their size, media presence and business-like structures. This trajectory from obscurity to market dominance over the last fifty years reflects a distinctive shift in religious life and popular culture, but it also reflects a particular kind of ecclesia – one that is able to quickly adapt, innovate and absorb cultural trends.

1.1 Forces that motivate Pentecostal churches to adopt new technologies

In Ward’s analysis of the Charismatic movement he makes an interesting link between the characteristics of Pentecostal/Charismatic movements and the values that emerged across Western countries like NZ through the counter-culture period of the sixties and seventies. He argues that while Pentecostal/Charismatic movements “can be understood as an incarnation or contextualisation of the gospel and church into the emerging baby boomer culture of the 60s and 70s, there are limits to how far culture

²¹ Clark, *Pentecost at the Ends of the Earth*, 146.

²² In Auckland, five out of the seven largest churches in the city are Pentecostal. These churches include Life Church, Church Unlimited, City Impact Church, Elim Christian Centre and Destiny Church. The two exceptions are Windsor Park Baptist and St Paul’s Anglican.

²³ The phrase, “Pentecostals were considered the Loony Fringe,” was coined by Rev Dr Ken Booth in a conversation with him while he was Dean of College of Theology in Christchurch 2008.

can set the agenda or determine the shape.”²⁴ Ward asks: “[W]ere there things in this emerging new culture of the 60s and 70s, which instead of embracing and sanctifying should have been resisted, instead of feeling comfortably at home should have felt alien and out of step with the gospel?”²⁵ It is a question that prompts some in-depth reflection, especially when considered over and against the overt way large Pentecostal churches now embrace technology.

The desire to invest in visual gadgetry and sophistication to communicate has been and continues to become an integral dimension of daily life in advanced capitalist societies like NZ. Visual technology in its various forms, from hi-tech multi-media devices to professional graphic designers, are now an intrinsic part of what one may experience when entering a large Pentecostal church and its organisational system.²⁶ 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.²⁷ This shift however, which has gathered momentum over the last fifty years, is not without alliances of a more seductive nature. Advanced capitalism, with its companion consumerism, lies embedded in this visual advance, suggesting images are merely vestiges of a more complex cultural system bubbling beneath.

The church-going public of NZ are not immune to these deep currents of popular culture. A publicly receptive imagination fed by the subtle nuances of a consumerist vision and fed by an appetite for more intersect daily life at every permeable opportunity available. This is explicit in a plethora of advertising images designed both “to sell and shape subjectivity in ways beneficial to capitalism.”²⁸ The use of branding

²⁴ Kevin Ward, “The Charismatic Movement in New Zealand: Sovereign Move of God or Cultural Captivity of the Gospel?” Paper presented at the Systematic Theology Association of Aotearoa New Zealand Conference, Dunedin, October, 2011, 6.

²⁵ Ward, “The Charismatic Movement in New Zealand,” 6.

²⁶ In Auckland some of these churches would be City Impact Church, LIFE Church, Church Unlimited, Destiny Church, Equippers and Elim Christian Centre.

²⁷ In the opening paragraphs of Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartright’s book, *Looking Practices*, they 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.” Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.

²⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 81.

and the available benefits of visual and audio-visual mediums are fundamental tools in this schema. Harnessed and honed, such images compete for public attention in order to gain traction and market share. To be digitally visible is essential if one is to be competitive in the market. To ignore the realities of this narrative would be a denial of the wider narrative that now shapes the public domain.

Church organisations are not immune to these market forces. This is particularly evident, not just amongst Pentecostals but also Evangelicals. In Heidi Campbell's work on religious communities (which I refer to later), she draws attention to the Protestant reformation and the way "[it] 'turned a technological innovation into a spiritual obligation' by the mass production of books eventually promoting a trend toward individual spiritual devotion through personal book ownership and public proselytizing through the ease in transporting and disseminating the word of God." She goes on to argue: "These trends toward personal devotion and public dissemination of the gospel became key makers of the early Protestant movement."²⁹ These tendencies are still evident today within Protestantism but are most pronounced in the practices of Evangelical Christianity.³⁰ This is particularly evident among Christian Evangelical groups who value the act of public testimony and preaching. Such groups "often see and describe media such as television and the internet as positive technologies from the start because they provide access to a mass audience for their message."³¹ On this premise, visual media is simply seen as a conduit, neutral instrument used for good or for bad depending on the purpose to which it was given. It is a trajectory of thinking that may have implications for Pentecostals.

As a close sibling of Evangelical Christianity within NZ, the practices of Pentecostals are not dissimilar.³² However, the propensity to accept and appropriate a given technology

²⁹ Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, (London: Routledge, 2010), 114.

³⁰ Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*. 114.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Dayton observes that the emergence of Pentecostalism was but "a hairsbreadth from popular Evangelicalism." Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1987), 176. Since its foundation, Pentecostalism has made further moves towards Evangelicalism through participation in the American National Association of Evangelicals and has become more distinct from fundamentalism, with whom significant breaks occurred in 1928 and 1943. Discussion continues as to whether Pentecostalism can be seen as a sub-group of Evangelicalism or even as 'Fundamentalism plus'. See Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1997), 192-3.

within a Pentecostal ecclesia is geared by a slightly different set of motivations. Pentecostals' readiness to identify with, adapt, and absorb culture are characteristics that shape its peculiar ethos in any given context. Harvey Cox 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."³³

This capacity on the part of a Pentecostal ecclesia to absorb elements of its host culture taps another axiom of self-understanding: relevance.³⁴ The desire to be contemporary and have a relevant message flows out of historical themes that have given shape to Pentecostalism since its beginnings. At play within the tradition is the imperative of mission. Julia and Wonsuk Ma describe the Pentecostal movement as "a massive and often chaotic global Christian movement", which they argue is one of "two major Spirit movements in the twentieth century."³⁵ Its growth over its short history of a hundred years³⁶ has made many impacts on Christianity in general, but as Julie and Wonsuk Ma argue, it is "its role in mission which is extremely significant."³⁷ One example is the explosive growth of churches, particularly in the non-Western continents.³⁸ To understand mission from a Pentecostal perspective is to consider their mission practices, which in NZ have been primarily focused around proclamation and the conversion of individuals. Although a quantitative study recently completed by

³³ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 147-148.

³⁴ Linda Flett states: "[B]etween 1990 and 2008, [Assemblies of God NZ 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 NZ] was subject to a much deeper commitment to the Great Commission and to be 'Spirit led'." Linda Flett, *Proclaiming the Gospel in New Zealand*, 73.

³⁵ Julie C. Ma and Wonsuk Ma, *Mission in the Spirit: Towards a Pentecostal/Charismatic Missiology* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books, 2010), 1.

³⁶ Julie and Wonsuk Ma note the unprecedented growth of Pentecostal churches worldwide by arguing: "The latest statistics account for over half a billion Pentecostal-charismatics (523,767,000) by mid 2000s which is more than all the Protestant Christians put together at 342,035,000. This is only second to Roman Catholics at 1,056,920,000." *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Linda Flett on two Pentecostal streams within NZ suggests both methods and message are beginning to broaden, becoming more holistic and relational.³⁹ Nevertheless, as Julie and Wonsuk Ma more widely argue, “mission is [still] predominantly perceived as soul winning.”⁴⁰ For the most part across NZ, this focus of mission has been and continues to be the ideological centre, driving the vision of most Pentecostal churches.

For a Pentecostal ecclesia, this understanding of mission, coupled with an uncanny capacity to adapt and absorb culture, is significant. Within the NZ context, the posture of popular culture is increasingly shaped by an economic vision of prosperity and material wellbeing. Glossy images in advertisements inviting the public to indulge their desires abound. Competition to be heard and seen in the public domain is intense.⁴¹ The Christian voice is but one amongst many scrambling for recognition and a public space to display its wares. In the midst of this environment, the use of visual technology provides not only an effective mechanism, but also an attractive trajectory. Layered with other sensory mediums, visual technologies become a strategic tool to leverage belief and identity. The Pentecostal mandate of mission and technological enterprise converge at this point. The plausibility of the argument lies in the logic that technology as a God-given tool is to be used to further God’s kingdom on earth.⁴² In this respect, visual technologies are usually viewed as a neutral instrument. Campbell has argued that using media technology for mass evangelisation is a marker of Evangelical spirituality and practice.⁴³

Towards this end, Pentecostals have been quick to seize upon the utilitarian virtues of the digital world and explore possible applications for church life and growth. It is not difficult to understand the attractional pull visual technologies might have when considered in light of their potential to market a church and help it attract new attendees. The pragmatism of the Kiwi psyche, along with the desire of a Pentecostal congregation to get its message out, means that the decision to invest in visual

³⁹ Linda Flett, *Proclaiming the Gospel in New Zealand*, 126-128.

⁴⁰ Julie & Wonsuk Ma state: “Mission for most Pentecostals has never been merely the dutiful fulfilment of an obligation. The missionary task for many came close to being their movement’s organisational reason-for-being.” *Ma, Mission in the Spirit*, 50.

⁴¹ Brian Carrell, *Moving Between the Times* (Auckland: The DeepSight Trust, 1998), 107-117.

⁴² Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 114.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

technology becomes not just attractive but justifiable. Advertising and the application of all types of digital media follow. In this environment it is about packaging what is offered in such a way as to create not just interest but desire – the desire to experience what is offered.

Entrepreneurism thrives within this context. As stated earlier, Pentecostalism developed its own version of entrepreneurship, which emerged in the 1960s and has been unconsciously celebrated and championed by the tradition since as a benchmark of the ideal pastoral leader, a leader that can successfully pastor a Pentecostal church. It is an important benchmark that may have, and possibly is, unwittingly fuelling a new breed of entrepreneurial leader, one that is now keener than ever to master the benefits of technology as a means of reaching the unbeliever, growing a church, and accomplishing the great commission.

These priorities and commitments – entrepreneurship, relevance, mission and Church Growth – combine to form a powerful elixir. The effect may be that leaders and churches become overly indulgent of what technology has to offer, unaware of more divergent undercurrents and thus undiscerning as to how various visual technologies can actually shape belief systems and influence human behaviour. This stance gives weight to my opening argument that Pentecostal churches are particularly vulnerable to consumer culture, a culture that now shapes a shared way of being for most New Zealanders. To argue this point, it will be important to explore the notion of contemporary culture in relation to consumerism, the way images work, and the way they are used in marketing goods and services.

Chapter 2: Contemporary culture and the significance of images

The language “to be contemporary” or “being contemporary” frequently swirls around Pentecostal churches. The slogan appeals because it describes a readiness to adopt and absorb the surrounding culture and embody a posture of relevance that embraces the most recent technologies, fashion and marketplace innovations. This language signals an enthusiasm to assimilate culture rather than surrender to irrelevancy and cultural inertia. If the prevailing culture of NZ is understood as contemporary, then it is crucial to define the dominant narrative that underpins this view.

New Zealand is an advanced Western society with a modern economy. It, like others around the globe, is deeply dependent on its ability to market its commodities competitively within the context of a global economy. This narrative often shapes our daily lives. The latest analysis of economic trends and fiscal returns that are broadcast daily by TVNZ Business News animate not only the day-to-day conversation in corporate boardrooms, but also on factory floors and at kitchen tables. Many facets of life are affected by a nervous jitter on Wall Street or by flexing international oil cartels. To speak of contemporary culture in NZ is to acknowledge the dominant narrative of a capitalist consumerism that fundamentally shapes the corporate and individual identities of those living in Western societies.

Advanced capitalist societies like NZ 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, speaking out of a North American context, argues that “the essence of consumerism is the principle that consumption is an end-in-itself, its own justification.”⁴⁴ He goes on to state 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.”⁴⁵ This form of capitalism perpetuates the myth of consumer choice and promotes the idolisation of desire. These elements

⁴⁴ Note “consumerism” italicised emphasis by author. Robert G. Dunn, *Identifying Consumption*, 8.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

characterise a consumerist culture and shape the basic assumptions that drive fashion, technological advancement and market innovation.

“To be contemporary” is to identify with the latest fashion or technology and be in a position to purchase the desired commodities. In this respect, consumer culture “consists of a system of meanings, representations and practices that organise consumption as a way of life.”⁴⁶ The significance of choice in our desire, want or need to be contemporary raises the issue of subjectivity and the intriguing problem of insatiability. Dunn observes, “[One] of the key characteristics of high-consumption society is its attempt to conflate need, want, and desire, all of which tend to merge in a whole complex of subjective feelings and meaning surrounding the commodity.”⁴⁷ Dunn’s “complex of subjectivity” describes the cultural logic of contemporary culture, a logic that transforms the inherited frameworks of moral meaning and social obligation.⁴⁸

Some of the key issues surrounding consumerism give clarity to particular concerns that emerge for societies like NZ (which are wedded to a consumptive way of life). A major issue is the systematic arousal of consumer desire. This features in the festive and day-to-day rhythms of contemporary culture itself.⁴⁹ It is also celebrated in the increasing ease and accessibility of commodities.⁵⁰ Moreover, desire itself has become a product, an object to be manipulated. In a capitalist economy like NZ, much depends on the market’s ability to over-produce goods while simultaneously producing within consumers the desire to purchase those goods. The vitality of the economy depends on this interaction. This symbiotic exchange is marked by an historical shift in societal attitudes from issues of survival (need) to questions of want. Dunn notes that “need carries the implication of something more or less universal and fixed [while] want is

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁸ Hunter notes America’s dominating presence and influence in the world. He states: “[This] dominance is a bundle of contradictions. An example of this is American capitalism. While it has brought unprecedented freedom, wealth and mobility to people, consumerism has moved out of the market place to become the dominant cultural logic.” James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 198.

⁴⁹ “Boxing day” sale promotions and other public-holiday promotions are examples of commercialism and consumptive rhythms taking root in popular culture.

⁵⁰ One example would be the online website-based availability of commodities.

variable and elastic, bearing connotations of individual choice.”⁵¹ Here, Dunn identifies the subjectivity of self. It is a trajectory that has created increasing levels of individualism in contemporary culture. This is exacerbated by the relentless posturing of competing markets to create consumer desire through the promotion of stylised commodities based on status, lifestyle and fulfilment. All of this is geared to arouse desire in the consumer.

A related issue is the power and the triumph of advertising. The role advertising plays in a consumptive culture cannot be overstated here. The power of an advertisement to persuade is formidable. Advertisements evoke allusions of promise and abstract worlds, which are “situated in the present but in an imagined future.”⁵² The promise of a better self-image, a better appearance, or more prestige all create a feeling of dissatisfaction.⁵³ This is at the heart of the advertising industry. The morality of choice is maligned in the deployment of manipulative advertising strategies that are focused on the consumer to instil and perpetuate a sense of lack and dissatisfaction. Growing sophistication of visual technologies used by the industry only exacerbates this problem. Sturken and Cartwright, 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.”⁵⁴ 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.

Closely tied to advertising is the issue of identity. In recent academic discourse, a general consensus is noted by Dunn that consumption and consumer culture are now a focal point of identity formation in advanced societies. This is to say, material possessions and lifestyle practices along with “the media and advertising images play a major role in how we see ourselves.”⁵⁵ No longer is identity based upon inherited, externally imposed systems of beliefs and values, but rather upon an individual’s effort,

⁵¹ Dunn, *Identifying Consumption*, 97.

⁵² Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 265.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 278.

⁵⁵ Dunn, *Identifying Consumption*, 157.

will and self-interest in establishing their own place within society.⁵⁶ 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.”⁵⁷ 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. At a structural level, this causes ever-increasing levels of social fragmentation and isolation. The task of identity, having shifted from the group to the individual in the context of a consumer culture like NZ, has, as Dunn puts it, “become a problem, a goal and a project.”⁵⁸ How does the individual in this context reconcile the often divided and competing identifications within a single self and find an authentic self in the face of rootless anonymity? One response is lifestyle choice. Dunn describes this orientation as “a primary means of achieving identity in a commodity-based society organised around ideologies of choice and personal fulfilment.”⁵⁹ Society’s posture towards lifestyle choice as a means of anchoring identity is cause for concern.

The freedom to choose within consumer culture emerges as a subtle but underlying issue. To choose requires competence. It follows then that the kind of choices one makes, whether good or bad, are judged to be evidence of competence or a lack of it.⁶⁰ This is problematic when lifestyle choice is a means of anchoring identity. The reason is that decisions of lifestyle are more deeply dependent on two variable elements of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 159.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 188.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 159.

⁵⁹ Dunn, *Identifying Consumption*, 160.

⁶⁰ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 138.

culture: pleasure and image.⁶¹ Pleasure within a consumerist narrative is the pursuit and experience of a more satisfying life. Image, along with imagination, are the raw materials of consumerism. By feeding on a world of images, consumer culture supplies us with an array of cultural resources that embody hopes of a more satisfying life.⁶² This dependence on pleasure, which bears upon image, is constantly in flux. As Bauman points out: “[C]onsumer society thrives as long as it manages to render the *non-satisfaction* of its members (and so, in its own terms, their unhappiness) perpetual.”⁶³ It does this by denigrating and devaluing consumer products shortly after they have been hyped into the universe of desire. The freedom to choose is granted in theory but becomes unattainable in practice as the prospect of fulfilment erodes away.⁶⁴

Social dislocation and the psychological disconnectedness of people are also issues that are emerging for consumerism. 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.⁶⁵ Bauman names this aptly in stating that “being bored, in addition to making one feel uncomfortable, is turning into a shameful stigma.”⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ Sturken and Cartwright argue that “ads set up particular relationships between the signifier (the product) and the signified (its meaning) to create signs in

⁶¹ Pleasure is the new regime that debunks the old task-oriented regime of industrial capitalism. Image is the perception and subjectivity of self, which is subject to image making of the advertising industry. Dunn, *Identifying Consumption*, 161.

⁶² Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 117.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ This relationship is not just with material products but extends to services and, increasingly, the consumption of images, events and representations.

order to sell not simply products but the connotations we attach to those products.”⁶⁸ Products, along with brands, in the way they are advertised, are encoded with meaning. Ads “operate with a presumption of relevance that allows them to make inflated statements about the necessity of their products” and the value of belonging to a particular brand.⁶⁹ The power to shape imagination in this respect is notoriously selective.⁷⁰ It is guided by performance and a fanciful world of new experiences to be had.

Earlier I argued “to be contemporary” (within the NZ 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 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.”⁷¹ 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.⁷² This warrants an examination of consumerism in relation to its use of images.

2.1 Consumerism and its use of images

In relation to consumerism, visual culture is the platform upon which consumptive ideologies disseminate. Sturken and Cartwright state: “Our lives are increasingly dominated by the visual and by communication technologies (both wired and wireless) that allow for global circulation of ideas, information, and politics.”⁷³ Arguably, looking is a social practice, an everyday reality of the human experience. Given the advances made in the technical ability to (re-)create and manipulate an image that can be managed and sold, interest has only increased. This is particularly evident in the realm of marketing where image-making has become the sharp edge of an effective retail

⁶⁸ Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 276.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 128.

⁷¹ Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 266.

⁷² Visual culture is defined by Sturken and Cartwright as “the shared practices of a group, community, or society through which meanings are made out of the visual, aural, and textual world of representations and the ways that looking practices are engaged in symbolic and communicative activities.” Ibid., 3.

⁷³ Ibid., 1.

industry. Large corporations and small businesses alike proportionately spent large sums of money on impression management in an attempt to gain public attention so they can increase their social presence and influence. Simply put, the everyday practice of looking has become a focal point of power. 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. Through the use of images and the promotion of commodities, consumerism has been fundamental in the growth of visual culture. Lying hidden beneath, however, are the dynamics of social power and ideology to which an epistemological commitment to consumption is unwittingly sought. These assumptions underpin the way people choose to look and give way to practices that embody a consumptive way of life.

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 “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.”⁷⁴ 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. Cultural images and symbols are not exempt from the exploitive power of advertising. A sacred image, practice or icon can be emptied of its original meaning, yet retain its novel power to persuade by taking it and placing in a completely different context. Fed by a mosaic of other symbols and images, the original image is stripped bare of sacred meaning and re-assembled with contemporary symbolism to voice a whole new message. In the process, new meaning is given to the symbol while retaining its original narrative power to be novel and curiously inviting.

⁷⁴ Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 9.

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 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.”⁷⁵ 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 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.”⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid., 278.

⁷⁶ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 36.

⁷⁷ The generative power of an image is its ability to project of itself upon an audience a sense of status and prestige.

⁷⁸ The promotion and production of a personality becomes an attractive commodity in the desire for identity and significance. Sturken and Cartwright discuss the politics of reproducibility and argue that “Germany’s Third Reich anticipated much of the contemporary use of images in politics to groom the image of political leaders and the cult value that images can produce.” They go on to state that “Its

Suffice to say, the ease and the speed to which promoters are able to replicate a digital image and then circulate it widely among the public through visual media has “greatly increased the ability of images to captivate and persuade.”⁷⁹

Alongside this, visual media plays a crucial role in consumer culture as it acts as a kind of symbolic inventory of resources. Stewart Hoover, in his discussion about the interaction of religion with media, notes that there has been a good deal of concern expressed about the potential impact of media-based images upon the religious lives and interests of audiences, young and old.⁸⁰ He argues this has “largely gone on under the radar of religious institutions and authorities.”⁸¹ It follows then, that with the emergence of a new religious/symbolic marketplace, religion and consumerism have increasingly converged and now comfortably coalesce together in a sophisticated media culture of image and advertising.

2.2 How do images work?

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. This is emphasised in Sturken and Cartwright, who argue that “images are an important means through which ideologies are produced and onto which ideologies are projected.”⁸²

Historically, images have often been viewed as signs. The study of signs, called semiotics, goes back as far as the ancient Greeks. Plato (428-347 B.C.E.) addressed the difference between “natural” and “conventional” (human-made) signs, while Aristotle

images of grandeur, monumentality, and massive regimentation are icons for both fascist aesthetics and the practice of propaganda.” Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 199.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2006),

⁸¹ Ibid., 75.

⁸² Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 23.

(384-322 B.C.E.) laid down a theory of the sign.⁸³ He defined “sign” (*sēmeion* in Greek) as having three dimensions: “the physical part of the sign itself, the referent to which it calls attention, and its evocation of a meaning.”⁸⁴ Lynne Baab discusses semiotics in her doctoral work on church websites.⁸⁵ She draws on the significance of St Augustine’s (AD 354-430) understanding and states that he “defined a sign as a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses, and classifies signs as [either] natural, conventional, or sacred.”⁸⁶ Natural signs are found in nature (e.g., the rustling of leaves, the colour of plants).⁸⁷ Conventional signs are made by humans (e.g., words, gestures, symbols) and “serve a fundamental need – they allow humans to refer to and, thus remember the world.”⁸⁸ “Sacred signs such as miracles convey messages from God which can only be understood through faith.”⁸⁹ In the modern era, the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and scientist-philosopher Charles Sander Peirce (1839-1914) did much to provide a more detailed perspective around the concept of sign. They developed principles of semiotics and proposed linguistic theories which, in the middle of the twentieth century, were built upon and adapted by various theorists in order to analyse images.⁹⁰

Saussure provided theories of structuralism which have since informed ways of analysing visual culture. Roland Barthes, who builds upon Saussure’s work, developed a binary model by which the anatomy of a sign and its workings can be understood. The diagram below (Figure 2.1) describes the two elements within a sign structure.

⁸³ Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012), 94-95.

⁸⁴ Marcel Danesi, *Understanding Media Semiotics* (London: Hodder Education, 2002), 29.

⁸⁵ Lynne M. Baab, “The Future Church: Identity and Persuasion on Congregational Websites” PhD Thesis University of Washington, USA, 2007, 22.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Danesi, *Understanding Media Semiotics*, 29.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 29–30.

⁸⁹ Lynne M. Baab, “The Future Church”, 22

⁹⁰ Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 27.

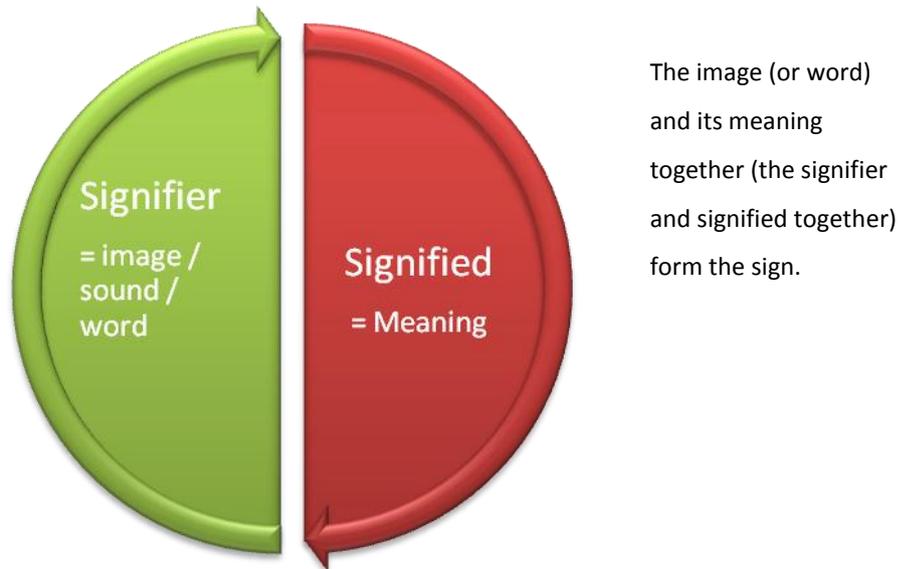


Figure 2.1

The *signifier* is the entity it represents, while the *signified* is the meaning it conveys. It is important to note, however, that the interpretation of an image “depends on historical context and the viewers’ cultural knowledge.”⁹¹ For example, an image of a rose given in a particular context could communicate the notion of romantic love. However, the same image projected within a non-Western context may not convey the same notions of affection. This highlights the crucial role that culture plays in shaping those conventions to which a sign might point, use and play off. Sturken and Cartwright argue, “As conventions, signs can be a kind of shorthand language for viewers of images.”⁹² This model then is a helpful window from which to view images and locate the various factors that give meaning, along with soliciting a response.

For Peirce however, the meaning of a sign lay in the interpretation of the sign and subsequent action. He described three kinds of signs: iconic, indexical and symbolic. This is helpful as contemporary advertising uses all three to construct selling messages.⁹³ An iconic sign, like a photo of a young Maori male, resembles the object it represents, while a symbolic sign has no obvious relationship to the image it represents. A good example of a symbolic sign is the golden arches of a McDonald’s fast-food franchise. It is an image we associate with fast food, yet it bears no resemblance to the object it points to. An indexical sign, on the other hand, involves an

⁹¹ Ibid., 30.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 33.

existential relationship between the sign and the interpreter. This means the sign and the interpreter coexist in the same place at the same time. For example, the visual image of the container ship *Rena* on the Astro Lab reef caught on camera by Television One news reporters (2011) testifies to the maritime disaster that followed. The significance of each sign is its particular projection. As Sturken and Cartwright state: “[T]he creation of signs semiotically is usually the result of a combination of factors in an image, and this means the meaning is often derived through the combination of text and image.”⁹⁴ In this respect, all three kinds of signs are worthy of note as they are used in advertising to promote products and sell ideas.

Images, therefore, work by mediating meaning, but they do so in a persuasive manner. Marcel Danesi expounds a theory of mediated meanings by calling attention to the notions of “denotative meaning” and “connotative meaning”. Denotation is the “face value” linkage established between the sign and its referent – perception is literal and generalised. Connotation, on the other hand, “is the operative mode in the production and deciphering of creative texts such as poems, novels, musical compositions, and works of art.”⁹⁵ It is the connotation of an image that gives it persuasive power. This is because it evokes feelings and perceptions about things. Sara Morgan 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.”⁹⁶ In her research, she draws two significant conclusions. Firstly, “Advertisers, through the use of visuals, seem to be able to suggest positive claims about their products and engage the consumer in the persuasion process simultaneously, because the consumer is responsible for reading into the ad and inferring the claims him/herself.”⁹⁷ Secondly, “visually dominant ads are able to advance multiple claims” without doing so explicitly.⁹⁸ This raises questions about the persuasive nature of images and structures of power that create, edit and deliver visual media. The notion that visual texts make

⁹⁴ Ibid., 32–33.

⁹⁵ Danesi, *Understanding Media Semiotics*, 36.

⁹⁶ Sara Morgan is among a growing number of scholars who argue that “visuals elicit not just emotional responses but, also, *specific beliefs* about products.” Sara Morgan, “More than Pictures? An Exploration of Visually Dominant Magazine Ads as Arguments,” *Journal of Visual Literacy* 25:2 (Autumn 2005): 146.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 161.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

complex figurative arguments suggests that visual communication is neither passive nor neutral, but is in fact active and persuasive, and may in some cases also be deceptively seductive.

This persuasive power is also visible in rhetorical artistry of images to influence human behaviour. The semiotic notion of intertextuality means the boundaries of an image are permeable.⁹⁹ By linking genres, images and text, new and ambiguous meanings become imbedded in the message structure.¹⁰⁰ 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.”¹⁰¹ An example of this was an Apple advertising campaign that seemingly used religious imagery to promote its iPhone 4s and persuade consumers of its transcendent God-like qualities as a new technology. Moreover, permutations of visual media in kind, coupled with new technologies, have created a cultural appetite for more sophisticated forms of visual communication.

Lynne Baab notes two significant shifts that have taken place in communication over the last thirty years: the eclipse of verbal modes in preference of more visual modes of communication, and an increasing move towards a market mentality.¹⁰² Both are related to advances in technology and globalisation (accompanied by social change), which have resulted in more fluid forms of communication. While evident at multiple levels, a dominant driver in this quest is institutional communication, which is increasingly shaped by visual elements in recognition that images have a discourse

⁹⁹ One “useful semiotic technique is comparison and contrast between differing treatments of similar themes (or similar treatments of different themes), *within* or *between* different genres or media.” Daniel Chandler, “Semiotics for Beginners,” <<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem09.html>> (4 August 2012).

¹⁰⁰ Daniel Chandler argues that “intertextuality should lead us to examine the functions of those images and written or spoken text used in close association within a text not only in terms of their respective codes, but in terms of their overall rhetorical orchestration.” Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ott and Walter proposed three intertextual strategies: parodic allusion, creative appropriation and self-reflexive reference. B. Otto & C. Walter, “Intertextuality: Interpretive Practice and textual Strategy,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17:4, 2000, 429-36. Cited in Heidi A. Campbell & Antonio C. La Pastina, “How the iPhone became divine: new media, religion and the intertextual circulation of meaning,” *New Media Society* 18 May 2010, <<http://nms.sagepub.com/content/12/7/1191.html>> (October 2011), 1191-1207.

¹⁰² Lynne M. Baab, “Portraits of the Future Church: A Rhetorical Analysis of Congregational Websites” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 31 (November, 2008), 24.

power to not just inform but actively promote ideas and products; that is to say, not only “to tell but also to sell.”¹⁰³ These shifts bring particular challenges to the fore.

Kress highlights one 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.”¹⁰⁴ 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. The concern Kress raises is significant for religious communities and, in particular, I would argue those within a Pentecostal tradition. If 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?

2.3 The religious-social shaping of technology as an analytic tool

Heidi Campbell investigates the reactions of a variety of religious groups to the introduction of new forms of media into their communities and lives of faith. She pushes past current scholarship on the subject of religion and new media, which she argues has had “a tendency to frame media technology only as a determinative force unto itself driven by its own values.”¹⁰⁵ This view “assumes media consumers are passive consumers who do not make thoughtful choices about how, why, and to what end they use media technology that they are presented with.”¹⁰⁶ Her book suggests a different starting point, one that considers “religious individuals and communities as

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Guther Kress, and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London: Routledge, 2006), 5.

¹⁰⁵ Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 6.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

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.”¹⁰⁷ 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.

Her method or analytical frame is comprised of four stages:¹⁰⁸

- 1) An exploration of the *history and tradition* of a religious community related to their media use. This provides a narrative of practice that helps the group establish communal precedents for its use of media. This would include “decisions made regarding texts, as one of the earliest forms of media, often serve as a sort of template for future negotiations with other media.”¹⁰⁹
- 2) This leads to a study of *core values and patterns* within this religious community, with attention paid to how it lives out its core social values in the contemporary context. Identifying the community’s dominant social and religious values and how they are integrated into patterns of contemporary life is a crucial part of this research.
- 3) Next, one investigates the *negotiation process* this religious community undergoes when faced with a new form of media. “Researchers consider how previous phases inform a community’s choices and response to the new technology when considering the ways in which a new technology is accepted or rejected, and/or reconstructed.”¹¹⁰ This involves an evaluation of the media in light of past community precedents of media engagement and situating it within the current needs and goals of the community.
- 4) Once the negotiation process is complete, this approach recognises the need to pay attention to the resulting *communal framing and discourse*. Campbell notes consideration needs to be given to “how technology influences the social sphere of the community and requires amendments to previous language

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 188–189.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 60.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 61.

about media technology or even that new ones be constructed and publicized.”¹¹¹ She argues that it is important to pay attention “not only to a religious community’s actual use of technology, but the language which surrounds its use and introduction into the community as an act of value setting and boundary maintenance.”¹¹² Language serves as a tool for internal marketing and a boundary-setting device within the community. Three common discourses are noted by Campbell: prescriptive, officialising and validation.¹¹³ Each discourse is a metric that offers an avenue of insight into the discernment process of a congregation and particular power structures (both formal and informal) that determine and regulate the use of media technologies.

In the following chapter I make use of this analytical frame as a tool to gain a greater understanding of a particular Pentecostal ecclesia: its choices, beliefs and language related to the use of media technologies.

To understand how Pentecostal churches might engage with visual technology and verify the extent to which technology may be shaping Pentecostal churches in NZ, this thesis examines a large Pentecostal church that identifies itself as Elim Christian Centre – East (EE).

2.4 Research method: Structure and fieldwork data

Data for this research was gathered through a series of sixteen interviews, which included: 1) the organisation’s senior leaders; 2) those employed by the organisation as its visual designers; and 3) congregants representing a cross-section of individuals between the ages of twenty and fifty-five years who are regular attendees.

Congregants were selected by a staff member on the pastoral team. All participants remain anonymous except the identities of the senior and associate pastors who gave

¹¹¹ Ibid., 62.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Each of these three discourses is relevant to the discussion. Campbell describes each by stating: “In a prescriptive discourse, religious individualism and groups laud technology for its ability to help in the fulfilment of Christian goals and practice, especially in that technology can aid and extend the high valued act of evangelism. Officialising discourse aid religious communities, especially religious leaders, to talk about technology in terms of how it helps solidify structural or theological goals of the community. Validation discourses are used by religious groups to demonstrate how technologies complement goals of their community and serve as a way to affirm communal identity.” Ibid., 189.

their permission to be named. The names of every other person identified in the interview process are fictitious.

The parameters of the study do not extend to the three other associated campus sites that are considered to be part of the larger church entity known as Elim Christian Centre (ECC).¹¹⁴ It is important to note, however, that the Central Church body that administers and runs the various campuses is located centrally at EE, the church congregation upon which this study is focused.

The research method used is qualitative. Interviews took place in two cycles. In the first cycle, the founding pastor and the associate pastor, a retired elder and those leading the design team were each interviewed. Between the first and second cycle nine images given to EE's ethos were identified; each drawn from advertising and display points promoting EE's persona. Each image was then printed on an A4 card and used as a tool to frame the second cycle of interviews.¹¹⁵ Ten people (six males and four females of varying ages) from the congregation were interviewed. This consisted of six separate face-to-face interviews of various configurations: a focus group of four people, four one-on-one interviews, and an interview with a newly-married couple. The approach I took throughout was a semi-structured one. A list of open-ended questions was prepared and used loosely to guide interviews and gather data.

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.¹¹⁶ The next chapter begins with information gained from the first cycle of interviews, which provide an understanding of EE and the organisation's approach to visual technologies.

¹¹⁴ These churches are known by location as: 1) Elim NORTH, Whangarei, 2) Elim Central, Auckland CBD, 3) Elim South – Manukau, South Auckland, and 4) Elim East – Howick, Eastern Suburbs. All four are branded as Elim Christian Centre, which is a member of the Elim Churches of New Zealand. "Elim Christian Centre" <<http://www.elimchristiancentre.org.nz/locations--times.html>> (2 July, 2012).

¹¹⁵ See Appendix.

¹¹⁶ These include: noting patterns, seeing plausibility, clustering, counting, making comparisons, building a logical chain of coherence and making conceptual/theoretical coherence. Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* (California: Sage Publications, Inc, 2009), 234.

Chapter 3: The senior pastor and the design team

The notion of visual technology and its potential to communicate a collective identity was probably not something one usually considered to be of any importance when planting a church in the 1980s. However, for an energised body of people under the entrepreneurial leadership of Luke Brough, visual impressions and public perception did matter. In 1985 a new church was planted called Elim Christian Centre (ECC) known today in its campus form as Elim East (EE).¹¹⁷ Luke Brough, founder and current senior pastor of EE, strongly voiced his vision for a contemporary church that could influence its surrounding community and yet be mildly Pentecostal.

From its commencement, creating the right impression and managing public perceptions has been an important element in the formation and ongoing development of EE. This was apparent in an interview with Martin Jones, retired Elder of EE (1985-2010). When asked about the visual display of the words, “Reach Serve Influence” (Figure 3.1), and the significance of this visual artefact for the church, he responded: “The church is very much into impression management. [It] functions in a way that leaves a very good impression upon the community, which is why the church must be on a main road. It must be seen.” Questioned further, Jones responded by saying, “If you have a good influence in the community, people will come and be converted.”



Figure 3.1

The vision of EE, as stated, is very much embodied by its senior minister, Luke Brough, who says he was initially inspired by Robert Schuller’s book, *Your Church has Possibilities*, and in particular Schuller’s message of positivity.¹¹⁸ Another significant person who emerged on the international scene after the church had started was Rick Warren, who is the celebrated author of the book, *The Purpose Driven Church*.¹¹⁹ As

¹¹⁷ Elim East (EE) up until 2005 was known as Elim Christian Centre (ECC).

¹¹⁸ This response came early in the interview regarding EE, when I asked Luke Brough, “So what inspired you? Any particular person?”

¹¹⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

Luke explains, Warren’s emphasis on relevance and his straightforward teaching on the purpose of the church were doubly attractive. Luke states that “Warren’s tag-line, ‘saying things on Sunday that were helpful on Monday’ fitted well with my own philosophy.” He goes on to say: “I wanted a church not just to be a Sunday



Figure 3.2

Church ... [but] a seven day a week church [that] incorporated a school, a Bible School, bookshop and pre-school.” Warren’s insights on how to grow the church without compromising either mission or message articulated not just a plausible model for EE to adopt but a very conducive formula they were able to absorb. It is important to note that across the denomination from 1990 to 2008, Elim showed itself to be highly responsive to methodologies offered by Saddleback and Willow Creek.¹²⁰ This is argued by Linda Flett, who writes in her MTh thesis that for Elim “the concept of friendship evangelism was readily embraced and by 1993 any caution that seeker-sensitive services may stifle Pentecostal preference for Spirit-led liturgy appears to have disappeared.”¹²¹ This is consistent with the philosophy of EE which has successfully emulated and promoted the Saddleback seeker-sensitive model of church.

The subsequent growth of EE and the vision prescribed by Luke Brough has proven to be a powerful manifestation of this seeker-sensitive ideology. By 2000, EE had become the flagship of the Elim Churches of NZ and a visible bench-mark for other Elim churches to follow. Today EE is an icon that scripts for other Elim churches a formula of how to be a successful contemporary Pentecostal church in the modern era of doing church in NZ.¹²² Moreover, through EE’s branding and promotion of a recognisable label (Figure 3.2), most other Elim churches throughout NZ have now adopted the brand as a symbol of denominational identity. This has even gained some international

¹²⁰ Linda Flett, *Proclaiming the Gospel in New Zealand*, 72.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² The term contemporary church is defined by Luke Brough as “a church that evaluates everything it does by asking of 3 questions: Is it biblical? Is it relevant? Does it work?”

notoriety with the Elim churches in the United Kingdom. They suggested recently that their churches should also adopt the same symbol and make it their official logo.¹²³

Today EE is the largest Pentecostal congregation, and possibly the largest church congregation, in the eastern suburbs of Auckland. It has an impressive building complex and a congregation of 3,000 people in attendance across its Sunday services. The church is also an educational provider with primary and secondary school facilities. The primary school and church are adjoining facilities strategically positioned on a major arterial route that links Howick with Golflands, Botany Downs and Highland Park. It is an area that has experienced considerable land development and urban growth. Growth began in 1985 and increased exponentially, only to tail off more recently with the global financial crisis in 2007. Its socio-economic status is largely represented by a middle class professional constituency. While the ethnicity of the area is still predominantly European, an influx of immigrant peoples from Asia, India and South Africa throughout this period is noted as having an influence on the area and contributing to its economic prosperity, cultural diversity and burgeoning middle-class status.¹²⁴ EE is a congregation that mirrors the diversity of its neighbourhood.

The values and beliefs that define EE reflect the views of the senior minister and his philosophical framework for understanding ministry. To this end, Luke's own church background and early ministry experience with the Brethren Assemblies of New Zealand underpins a number of these values and beliefs. When asked what the significant values of EE are, Luke's immediate response was "community – we are a community church. We've always tried to be relevant to our community." This notion of community, voiced by Luke, is understood to be EE's outward orientation, which is to engage and influence its neighbourhood. This means programs are focused around the perceived needs of the wider community and designed to achieve evangelistic outcomes.¹²⁵

¹²³ The Elim Church of United Kingdom want to create an international symbol for Elim churches worldwide and are advocating that the ECC logo be adopted.

¹²⁴ "Quick Stats/About Place," Statistics New Zealand, <<http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/AboutAPlace.aspx?expand=2000008&ParentID=1000002&type=ta&ss=y%20title=&scrollLeft=0&scrollTop=0.html>> (1 July, 2012).

¹²⁵ Evangelistic outcomes refer to people getting saved, as defined in Elim's "Statement of Faith." "We believe that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and that through the death and risen

Combined with the notion of community, Luke voiced the belief that EE was about family. This metaphor is both descriptive and prescriptive. A high level of relationality was noted amongst staff. Operational processes appeared informal and self-regulating. Clustered alongside these values, Luke voiced the words: “contemporary and modern” and went on to say, “I am not really a traditionalist. I don’t like tradition as such.” This posture is consistent with Open Brethren ecclesiology, which is not given to high church traditions and is quite suspicious of mainline church liturgical practices.¹²⁶

A corollary theme in support of this posture is the Biblicism to which EE adheres. This is characterised by a hermeneutic given to a more literal reading of scripture alongside the immediacy of scripture to provide how-to formulas for the unchurched to access Christian life. Within this schema, the mode of communicating Christian truth is to bundle together supportive texts and work them into digestible propositions suitable for public consumption.¹²⁷ This rationale grows out of the language of relevance and the conviction that being contemporary is crucial.

While the desire to flatten biblical truth into consumable bites is an important pitch, one belief that remains undiluted and above the voice of relevance is the priesthood of all believers. Luke stated that holding to this belief is “one of the keys to [EE’s] growth.” He went on to say: “I want to train people to receive ministry from the body rather than come to the holy altar for the holy man to lay the holy anointing.”¹²⁸ This theme runs through the organisation and was made explicit (in the context of talking about values) when Luke remarked about EE’s working environment. Further to this, he stated that this belief is “a point of difference [EE has in relation] to a lot of [other] Pentecostal churches,” which had each created their own hierarchical structure of clergy-laity divide, not dissimilar to traditional churches. This was reiterated by Luke in

power of Christ all who believe and confess Jesus as Lord can be saved from the penalty and power of sin.” Elim Churches of New Zealand Inc. “Statement of Faith” <<http://www.elim.org.nz/about/beliefs.aspx>. html> (10 July 2012).

¹²⁶ F. Coy Coad comments that the founding fathers of the Brethren movement “rejected all conscious tradition in the matter of church order.” Coad argues, “Brethrenism came into existence because church life seemed to its founders to be formal and lifeless.” F. Coy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1968), 244, 252.

¹²⁷ An A5 handout of the Sunday sermon is provided each Sunday. This consists of scriptures arranged under three to four propositional statements.

¹²⁸ Preceding this statement, Luke said: “I would like to see everyone find their place, find their gifting, be fulfilled in their calling and serving God at whatever level.”

adding: “We say as a church and staff, we are a horizontal structure not a vertical structure ... It doesn’t matter whether you are the senior minister or whether are the cleaner, we are all equal.” Although, in stating this, Luke was very adamant that it was important to have a leader.¹²⁹ To this, he added, “You can only have one vision or there is division.” This definition of leadership is descriptive of EE’s approach to church governance and decision-making functions out of a CEO model to which Luke is the undisputed visionary leader.

Two reoccurring themes were noted when observing Sunday services and interviewing senior leadership and the design team: the energy and effort put into visual technology (discussed in this chapter) and the fluid structure (discussed in the next chapter). These themes form the basis of this chapter and provide descriptors outlining the posture of EE towards the use of visual technology. Each descriptor is expanded upon in relation to the gathered data and analysed accordingly. These findings are then discussed within a framework of likely concerns and implications for congregants and congregation as a whole.

3.1 Energy and effort

The first significant theme that recurred in the interviews about EE’s use of visual technology was the effort and energy put into images. It is probable that the need to communicate and the need to maintain a shared identity shape a common conviction that visual technology is not just necessary but advantageous to the vision and ongoing success of EE. This effort and energy is both implicit and explicit across the church and within the organisation. In the following paragraphs I draw attention to the physical spaces of EE Sunday services, the employment of staff, the proliferation of images and the resources allocated to visual media.

3.1.1 Experiencing a Sunday

¹²⁹ Luke’s perspective on Christian leadership was to differentiate himself from his Brethren background. Luke added that Brethren churches are reluctant to speak of a person having the gift of leadership because it might undermine the “priesthood of all believers”. Luke commented this was a weakness of Brethren churches and the reason they never grew big churches.

Since its commencement in 1985, EE has worked consistently to build a public face of a friendly and contemporary church that has a relevant message for its community.



Figure 3.3

Aspects of this were evident when attending EE's Sunday services on December 5th 2011 when I visited. The property and church building were well manicured.¹³⁰ Designated car attendants directed incoming traffic and parking. A generous greeting was offered as I passed through the entrance doors. The entrance doors immediately opened up into a spacious and lively foyer, which had the feel of a bustling mall entrance.¹³¹ There was a lot to look at in the foyer (Figure 3.3): the centre column featured an offering box and a glossy magazine presenting the history of the church; to the right, a bookshop extending out on to the foyer; and to the left, an information booth, which seemed slightly outflanked by images being displayed above on a wide flat-screen TV.¹³² Further in, a large information stand was load with a colour-rich-collection of no less than twenty five fliers and brochures. I was in no doubt this church was alive with options. Directly opposite covering a complete inner wall, a mural towered over an adjoining table arranged artfully with Christmas décor and treats. It was a comforting image that signalled a familiar and warm reminder of the festive season alongside an equally compelling message to make a financial contribution and be involved.

Each of the three services that morning were 'seeker driven' and tightly managed.¹³³ Visitors received promotional material and experienced a seamless flow of contemporary music and song, which was capped off with a positive message of

¹³⁰ The church was well signposted with a four-metre sign on the grass verge in front of the main building. Two smaller "Alpha Course" signs were pitched either side. Also, I was struck by the church logo, which was replicated within the building as well as on almost all EE's promotional material.

¹³¹ The lighting in the foyer had an ambient feel. Bright down-lights were arranged strategically to highlight particular areas of significance.

¹³² A forty-three-inch plasma screen was displaying a pre-recorded piece of service with the worship band and leader on the stage in the main auditorium.

¹³³ Linda Flett comments that "seeker driven" is one step deeper than being "seeker sensitive" – it requires the ministry of the church be prioritised around felt needs of the unchurched. The terminology differentiated by Peter Wagner in *Churchquake* (Ventura: Regal, 1999), 188, cited by Linda Flett, *Proclaiming the Gospel in New Zealand*, 68.

hope.¹³⁴ Each element seemed effortless. Three larger-than-life projector screens hung over the stage (Figure 3.4). 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.¹³⁵ 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).



Figure 3.4

While these are my own experiences, which are of course subjective, the sum of all the aspects of the building and service combined to convey a sense that the organisation had a specific priority: to make a positive impression on those attending. At a deeper level, this priority may indicate a self-understanding that seeks to benchmark an identity around what it deems as attractive over-and-against what might be deemed as unattractive. This is possibly bound to a deep-seated awareness, even a savvy intuition, which recognises that visual impressions do create cultural capital. Given the emphasis of EE to be a church that wants to attract unchurched people, it is not surprising to learn that the organisation is significantly engaged in and committed to visual technology and the use of digital media. The sophistication, preparation and expertise needed to construct this level of performance each week requires of the organisation a considerable commitment of its resources.

¹³⁴ Visitors received a "Visitor's Pack" containing five printed items inclusive of a nicely bound booklet called *A Place for You*. This booklet was image-rich, with pictures and small amounts of text describing various ministries. Also, from the stage, an invitation was given for visitors to meet with the leading pastor should they wish to, following the service.

¹³⁵ Apart from an image in the form of three words, the walls around the auditorium were empty.

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.¹³⁶ The use of technology can and does reshape social behaviour. This is demonstrated by Heidi Campbell in her book, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 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 observes, “In a free market church culture those who cater most to [the wants of consumers] thrive the best.”¹³⁷ 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. Susan White voices this concern by arguing that “the commercial and materialist elements of technologized living erode our sense of the sacred.”¹³⁸ She goes on to state that “the fragmentation of experience and superficiality that technology demands keeps us from finding depth of meaning, and the manipulation of dependency and risk that technology relies upon distracts us from spiritual sources of assurance.”¹³⁹ Her response highlights the vulnerability of EE and the pitfalls of a free-market church culture that is immersed in the science of public perceptions.

¹³⁶ Susan White observes that Evangelicals often define success in terms of getting people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ regardless of the method used or the long-term consequences of using them. Susan White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 55.

¹³⁷ Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 40.

¹³⁸ Susan White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change*, 24.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

3.1.2 Specialised staff

To gain an appreciation of the effort put into visual media, interviews were conducted with those responsible for this area. Two were undertaken with those working in the design department and another in her role as the office manager.

Mary, one of several employed within the design department, spoke of her role as the person who “makes sure that everything produced [for the church] has an Elim Vibe.” She oversees two other designers and heads the team. Asked how long this team had been in operation, she explained that “the department had evolved.”¹⁴⁰ She went on to state that “I don’t know if it was really their intention to have a graphics department when they first started. It was more the fact they needed somebody to make their ideas visual so they employed an artist.” Mary credits the growth of a designated design department to Luke and his vision for the church. “Everything we do is out of Luke’s vision. My role is to make sure everything matches.” To this, she added her excitement about the recent appointment of Mike Griffiths, associate pastor and successor to Luke. She stated: “His views are quite fresh to hear. He sees visual communication as evangelism.” She went on to quote him as saying: “You know [visual design] is marketing but I think that’s like modern day evangelism.” These comments signal a belief on behalf of those leading, that visual media is not only a crucial area of investment but a necessary tool for church growth in the twenty-first century. The link between visual media, evangelism and marketing are clearly evident. They form a tight trio that gives voice and justification to the level of effort needed and the energy expended by the organisation in relation to its use of images.

In another interview, Stuart, a motion graphics specialist, spoke of his role and the time it took to produce the notices clip for the Sunday services. He referred to an audit done on the process several months earlier by an elder who facilitates time-management courses. Stuart recounted the outcome: “We sat down in the room and worked out from start to finish the whole process. Those present were absolutely ‘gob-smacked’ how much goes into it.” Stuart went on to talk about the process: the collation and editing of notices from various campuses; the care taken to select and

¹⁴⁰ Barbara, the officer manager and overseer of media and publicity relations for EE and ECC, has grown into her role. In response to a question about her involvement with media, she said, “I began 12 years ago overseeing a weekly newsletter.”

prepare presenters; and the editing and final production of the five-minute clip ready for Sunday.

While the production of the Sunday clip is a time-consuming weekly rhythm for Stuart, it only amounts to one task amongst a number of others he does (i.e., various church projects,



Figure 3.5

conferences, special events and new ministry initiatives). When asked about the communication of a new idea, Stuart spoke extensively about the development of the 'LifeGroup' symbol (Figure 3.5) 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.

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 – one of three intertextuality strategies outlined by Ott and Walters.¹⁴¹ 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.”¹⁴² 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 un-capitalised (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.

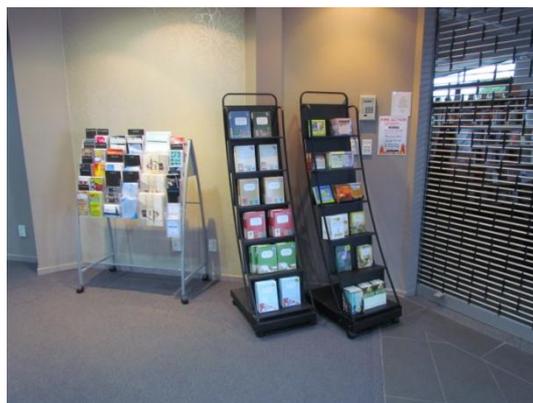
¹⁴¹ B. Ott & C. Walter, “Intertextuality: Interpretive Practice and Textual Strategy,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17:4 (2000), 429-36, cited by Heidi A. Campbell & Antonio C. La Pastina, “How the iPhone became divine” 1195.

¹⁴² Ibid.

In addition to the energy taken to produce this image, a fair amount of energy was exercised in relation to packaging. The image had to be fitted to various delivery tracks: i.e., the Sunday five-minute clip, website front page, handouts and posters. Stuart's account is a helpful indicator pointing to the effort and energy EE puts into visual communication. Given the energy put into the LifeGroup image and then accounting for the plethora of other images used by the organisation, it is plausible to argue that EE's efforts and the amount of energy that goes into the design and production of its images is significant and comparable to secular enterprises competing for the same market.

3.1.3 *The proliferation of images*

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. While some were more graphically alive than others, the pattern was the same: images had precedent over words. Each piece of literature was embellished with at least one image enhanced by colour and overlaid with a font conducive to the message.



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 notice 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. Moreover, it is the branding of these programs that is particularly noteworthy. Through the proliferation of images, EE has been able to commodify various programs and market them more widely – not just within the campus system, but across the denomination and around its immediate neighbourhood.

In EE's deployment of images, one reoccurring theme is evident: branding. In *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*, Mara Einstein explains: "Brands are commodity products that have been given a name, an identifying icon or logo, and usually a tagline as a means to differentiate them from other products in their category."¹⁴³ The fingerprints of branding are evident across a whole range of EE's ministries.¹⁴⁴ 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 states: "The name or the logo appears and everything that is associated with that brand comes to mind."¹⁴⁵ The development of brands by EE has become an effective tool in the creation of specific identities. A good example of this is demonstrated in EE's communication of its youth programs. PowerZone, Voltage, Oxygen and Sphere Edge are four distinctive groups. The identity of each is packaged into an image and presented as a commodity, a service to be accessed, bearing its own character, identity and brand.

EE's use of branding is not limited to its programs. The ECC logo (Figure 3.2) developed by EE (mentioned earlier) is in itself a brand, one that is prolific and very recognisable. For this reason it has been co-opted as the official branding logo of the Elim Churches of New Zealand. The brand is also the official logo of the Elim Christian School that is part of EE; the image was televised as a symbol of the school when the Mangatepopo canyoning tragedy was picked up by the media.¹⁴⁶ Its proliferation, along with other

¹⁴³ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 12.

¹⁴⁴ An example of this is the categorisation of age into specific groups. See "Elim Christian Centre" <<http://www.elimchristiancentre.org.nz/connect-by-age.html>> (27 July 2012).

¹⁴⁵ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 12.

¹⁴⁶ This is the official logo of Elim Christian School. It appears on all school jerseys and uniform apparel. It received national coverage in the media in April 2008 through the Mangatepopo canyoning tragedy.

images used to market church programs, has resonance with Mara Einstein's analysis; what so-called seeker churches, or mega-churches, have done is create "brands that religious shoppers identify and that readily become part of their consideration set when selecting a religious institution."¹⁴⁷ The logic is simple. The perpetual urge of EE to market itself through the proliferation of its images is compounded by the institution's goal to grow. Einstein argues: "Marketing-orientated institutions measure success by growth indicators – increases in sales, increases in brand awareness, and increases in repeat business."¹⁴⁸ She goes on to say that "[t]he same holds true for churches once they [begin] to track their goals based on a marketing mind-set. It is the culmination of marketing coupled with evangelism."¹⁴⁹ In this respect, EE is under some compulsion to put a high level of energy and effort into its images. It must bow to the prevailing forces of consumerism in order to maintain its visibility and retain its edge in the marketplace.

3.1.4 Resources allocated to visual media

EE, as mentioned earlier, is the administrative hub that directs a campus church consortium consisting of four church sites (inclusive of itself) under the shared brand name of ECC. This means EE's efforts have an impact that is wider than just its own campus. In this respect, it is able to consolidate, dedicate and diversify its resources into specific fields. This is particularly evident in the area of visual media. Two departments exist within this field: 1) a worship and creative arts department, which takes care of what happens on Sunday and is responsible for media recording and delivery; and 2) the design team, which serves both EE and the other three campuses that make up ECC.

The design team is comprised of an animation graphic designer and two graphic artists, all of whom are specialists in their fields. They are employed by ECC for the specific task of communicating the vision, values and life of the organisation, which means taking charge of the design elements. The organisation budgets a hundred working hours per week to this task. This translates into two-and-a-half full-time positions (2.5 FTEs). Those who are employed in these roles are well qualified. All three have fine-art

¹⁴⁷ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 14.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

degrees which, when combined, form a wealth of expertise most businesses would covet. While income figures are outside the parameters of this research, a measurement of FTE ratios does give a glimpse of where the organisation is putting its energy (Table 3.1 & 3.2).

Ministry Areas	FTEs <i>1 FTE = 40 hours of employment</i>
Total number FTEs	33.5
Design Team	2.3
Administration	7
Bookstore	3
Children	2.5
Maintenance	2
Ministry Training College	4.5
Pastoral Care	7.5
Senior Leadership	2
Worship	1
Youth	1.5

Table 3.1 Full time employed staff for EE

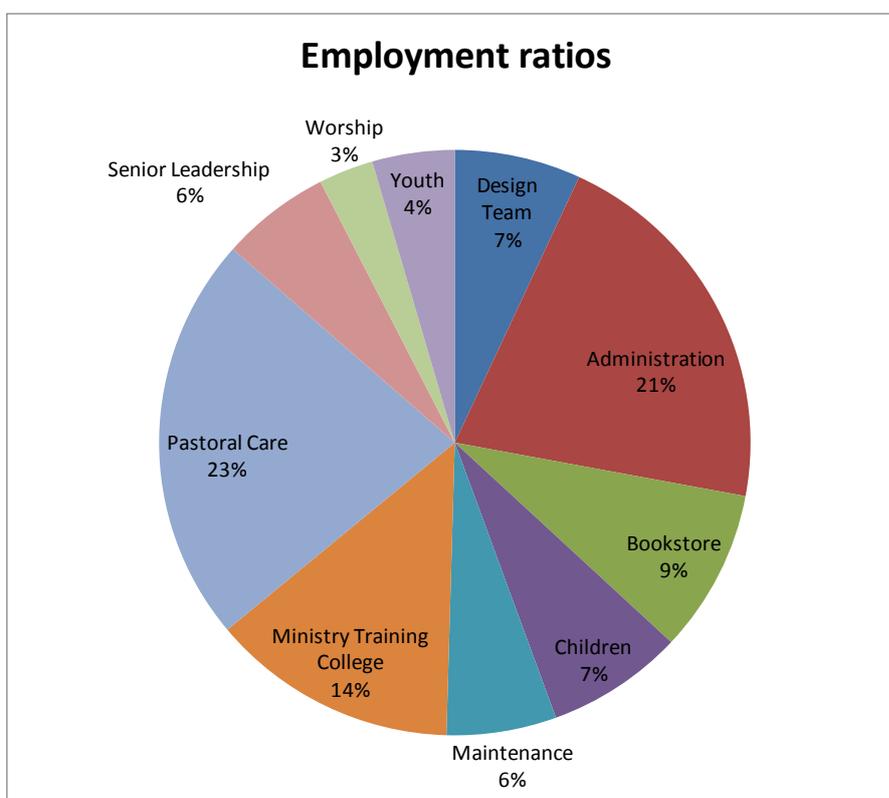


Table 3.2 Employment Ratios as percentages

Chapter 4: Process, structure and decision-making

A second significant theme to emerge from the data was the fluid and overly casual structure in which those who direct EE's visual media function. The design team not only provide the graphic input for EE, but also exercise visual discernment and decision-making discretion on image content, editing and the marketing of EE's identity and activities. Barbara, who oversees media and publicity said, "I sort of have a feeling for what happens but nothing is written down." The rationale guiding their work appears to be built upon two basic assumptions: 1) the use of visual technology is good because it does the job; and 2) the use of visual technology is advantageous to EE because it strategically provides an efficient, effective and plausible way to communicate; it gives the organisation a relevant and contemporary edge. While not stated, these basic assumptions lie embedded within EE's own self understanding and internal logic; that is, EE's vision is best served when pragmatic and strategic discretion is applied to its goals. The discretionary power of the design team operates in accordance with this understanding in as much as the voices directing visual media and its practices are those singularly focused around the promotion of EE's vision. In the following paragraphs I explore the workings of this fluid and casual structure. I note the kind of the decisions being made about visual media and discuss the potential influence of those decisions and their bearing upon EE more broadly.

When interviewing the design team, each was asked about the design process. In response to a question about possible stories, experiences or incidents that may have shaped policy on process, Mary (design team overseer) responded candidly that "EE had no policy." She said, "You are given a lot of free reign." She went on to describe an informal process of listening carefully to the senior minister and being attentive to his vision. She said, "I take my lead from Luke who might say something in passing, which is an action point he wants me to pick up on." She went on to say that the process is further clarified by persistent questioning. "I make sure I've got something solid to work on and I know what they want in the end." A similar response came from Stuart, who indicated he had enormous freedom to be creative and experiment with what he had been taught at university. As an example, he described the various design elements that he would put into the advertisements promoting the 2011 Christmas

services. When I asked how directive the organisation was in the process, and whether they gave direction as to what they wanted to achieve, Stuart responded by stating: “No, they are not giving us any of that at all – it’s almost up to me. This is OK as I was hired because of my particular skill-set.” He went on to voice enthusiasm for his craft by explaining the psychology behind a movie clip that he and the associate pastor were working on. This was in relation to their desire to sell the vision of LifeGroups to congregants.

While the structure around the design process appears fluid and casual, I did note the presence of an unspoken understanding across the organisation throughout the interviews. Each of the design members mentioned an emphasis on positivity, intentionality and purpose related to EE’s vision. This emphasis appeared in numerous ways in the interviews. For example, Mary explained that “someone might have an idea or a concept in mind for their department but it has got to fit within the bigger picture of Luke’s vision.” She reiterated the need to ask questions especially in keeping with the metric, “does this fit within the vision?”

This assumes another layer of understanding: that there is a familiarity with those images that EE uses to communicate its vision and identity. An important element of this is the notion of positivity and intentionality. Two visual artefacts in particular communicate this message. The more prevalent image, “Reach Serve Influence” (Figure 3.1), combines the force of three imperatives to form a single statement outlining EE’s identity and purpose. The simplicity of the image is compelling. When the senior pastor was asked what images he felt were the most defining for the organisation, he chose “Reach Serve Influence”. He explained that embedded within the statement is a collection of “outward looking words”. He went on to express the scope of each word in relation to EE’s desire to “reach the lost” and influence the wider community for Christ.

The other image that also feeds into the vision is a biblical text from Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” This text, which is displayed as a visual at the entrance of the auditorium, gained public prominence when national TV

covered the Mangatepopo Elim School tragedy and televised the image (on display in the foyer of the church) as a statement of EE's solidarity and hope.¹⁵⁰ In this sense, the image presents an even deeper layer of understanding that has embedded itself within the psyche of the organisation. It is a voice that resonates with positivity about the future and gives intention to the vision as an anchor that can steady life in times of uncertainty. Mike Griffiths (associate pastor) describes the image as "the life scripture of the church" – an image that "ties in with the school" and flows together with the "Reach Serve Influence" image.

4.1 Influences of a secular nature

Another theme to emerge from the data was the extent to which secular influences appeared to be framing the content and direction of EE's visual media. For the most part, these influences are undetected because they are 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.¹⁵¹ 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. It is cemented visually in the textual image: "Reach Serve Influence". However, concerns over the importation of secular ideas would likely be considered trivial, even hair-splitting, given EE's big-picture priorities of "saving the lost". Contrary to these sentiments, there is evidence in the data to suggest influences of a secular nature should not be dismissed so lightly. Moreover, I would argue, given the evidence, that EE is being shaped by outside influences over and against those coming out of a Christian tradition, be that Pentecostal or Evangelical. In the following paragraphs, I examine further the work of the design team and the kind of practices, processes and ideas they employ to promote the life and identity of EE.

¹⁵⁰ "School mourns victims of river tragedy," *3 News*, 16 April 2008, <<http://www.3news.co.nz/School-mourns-victims-of-river-tragedy/tabid/423/articleID/52685/Default.aspx.html>> (16 August 2012).

¹⁵¹ Mara Einstein describes the relationship between religion and marketing as symbiotic. She states that "Secular objects (books, material goods) are used in disseminating the sacred. The sacred must be promoted via the secular marketplace in order to recruit new members. On numerous levels the sacred has become more secular and vice versa." Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 74.

An instrumental move by the design team has been the establishment of a branding guide. Karan Klein, a writer who covers entrepreneurship and small-business issues, states, “A brand creates an image in the mind of the consumer.”¹⁵² EE’s branding guide reflects this goal. It is a comprehensive twenty-seven-page document that outlines and directs the visual landscape of EE. This is to ensure its visual identity remains consistent and congruent with its corporate values and beliefs.

The first page opens with questions that outline why the guide is necessary. It states that “it is easy to deviate from the visual vision and this [guide] aims at keeping a consistent and excellent reminder to what that is even though it will move with trends, and in keeping that seal of excellence to the utmost highest.”¹⁵³ This is expanded a few pages later under the heading: “Introduction/company values”.¹⁵⁴ Beneath, a series of words give voice to specific values that describe, as well as prescribe, EE’s ongoing life and identity. It reads: “At Elim some words that sum us up are: family, God, people, reach, serve, influence, a centre of hope, celebration, inspiration, positivity, community, multi-ethnic, colourful, inclusive-age/race, team, equipping, visionary, leadership, relevant, growth, place of refreshing, grace and filling.” With these words in view, the guide says to “let your mind wonder and explore the very vast array of ideas they conjure.” Of note is the sentence that follows. It states, “God is constant but how God is represented can change with generations.”¹⁵⁵ 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 discretion is evident on several levels. Within the branding guide itself, every image exhibited was secular in nature. Moreover, there was a deafening absence of Christian imagery. No picture of a cross, a dove, a Bible or, for that matter, a picture of Jesus or “a hero of the faith” were used. While the guide did encourage visual

¹⁵² Karen E. Klein, “A Practical Guide to Branding,” 9 June 2008, <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2008-06-09/a-practical-guide-to-brandingbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice.html> > (28 August 2012).

¹⁵³ Elim Christian Centre, *Brand Guide*, 2.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

imagination and flexibility, the visual imperative throughout seemed to suggest that a more secular stance was needed to express relevance and make the message contemporary. I heard a similar theme in the interviews with the design team members. I explored this further and found there was a deliberate resistance to their use. As Mary explained, EE did not want to communicate the wrong message. This was based on the idea that “some people have been beaten-up by church” so to use Christian images “might not have the best connotation. We want people to come to a place where there are no preconceived ideas and they simply experience God.” She added, “I don’t know whether a cross will do it for someone out there because it has been thrashed so much.” The argument appeared to be built upon the premise that Christian symbols and images like a cross are over worked, tired and for that reason do not have much market appeal. Furthermore, they may even put people off. It was felt that a picture of the church building was preferable because it was a more plausible image to the passing public. While not explicitly stated, it was inferred that images of the building conveyed a more contemporary perspective of Christian faith, something people could drive past and relate to. EE’s exclusion of Christian images from its public profile by way of advertising is ironic given its Christian heritage. This is problematic in as much as EE creates, all but unknowingly, a disjunction between itself and the Christian tradition in which it exists. The danger for its members is that they become increasingly distant from the Church’s historical narrative and practices.

Another secular and more subtle influence I observed was the division the design team made 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. Paul Hiebert in his book *Transforming World Views* picks up this theme: “In modernity, the division between the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’ has led to a distinction between public and private spheres of life, and between public knowledge and private knowledge.”¹⁵⁶ While this distinction was evident in decisions made by the design team to exclude sacred images from external presentations, the same distinction was

¹⁵⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 153.

not applied to secular images in respect of internal presentations. To the contrary, the dualism expressed at one level collapsed at another in the desire to be contemporary. This was expressed by using secular images to promote Christian ideas and activities to the congregation.

The reasoning behind this move is rooted deep in a desire to reach the “lost”. This emphasis appears to out-flank other perspectives, especially the value Christian images might have in shaping Christian affections. Mary voiced this sentiment when she commented “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. This is exemplified in Mary’s words: “We are not afraid to use whatever we can to make sure the messages gets out.”

The influence of marketing theories and advertising practices are clearly evident in EE’s visuals. They are the navigational instruments that provide direction and ultimately underpin 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. Mary spoke about the importance of the logo as a brand. She commented that there was no point in putting something out in the public domain without the Elim logo attached. The inference was strategic; repetition of the logo in different media is an effective advertising tool.¹⁵⁷ By digitising the logo and posting it on as many EE’s visuals as possible, brand recognisability strengthened. Marcel Danesi argues that “logos are pictorial counterparts of brand names. They are designed to generate the kind of connotative signification systems for a product through visual modality.”¹⁵⁸ This visual modality allows EE to differentiate itself from

¹⁵⁷ Marcel Danesi in reference to the use of multiple media states that “the repetition of advertising messages in different media of the same system is a primary strategy used to strengthen product recognizability.” Danesi, *Understanding Media Semiotics*, 194.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

other churches as well as present its products and services in a mode by which religious shoppers can easily identify and access what is offered.

Besides branding, I also observed the application of many other advertising techniques. Stuart spoke enthusiastically about the jingle they had attached to the LifeGroup advertisement and how it triggered an animated sequence of symbolic words intended to catch people's imagination about the possibilities of gathering in small groups. The jingle had the effect of reinforcing recognisability, while at a deeper level it enhanced the invitation of inference made by the visual rhetorical statements. These statements called upon congregants to extend their thinking about doing life together. Each word, appeared on top of the other at three-second intervals, and then shuffled in time to the beat. The visual effect was inviting: join in and be part of the fun. By establishing a connotative link to a well-known hip-hop artist, Stuart was able to create a feeling of novelty, of imaginary participation where perhaps an equally vibrant encounter might be experience.

As noted on page 24, research conducted by Sara Morgan, which explores "visually dominant magazine ads as arguments," makes the suggestion that consumer participation plays a crucial role in the argument of an ad.¹⁵⁹ This particular strategy is an embedded feature of the LifeGroup clip. When I observed this ad within an EE worship service, I watched as some congregants tapped in time to the music. The urge to do so seemed irresistible; almost fun. However, by engaging, congregants were unaware of the persuasive process in which they had entered and the argument they had become party to.

To summarise the argument so far, it is apparent from interviews with senior leaders and those associated with the design team that four significant themes are evident from the data. Firstly, EE puts significant effort and energy into visual media. Secondly, the design process operates out of a fluid and casual structure. Thirdly, secular influences dictate the content and shape the direction of EE's visual media. Fourthly, there is very little theological reflection about the significance of these strategies.

¹⁵⁹ Sara Morgan, "More than Pictures? An Exploration of Visually Dominant Magazine Ads as Arguments," 161.

4.2 Analysis and Concerns

The advertising techniques and strategies used by EE, while appearing baggage-free, are actually woven together by secular ideas. In Chapter 2, I referred to “intertextuality” as an encoding device.¹⁶⁰ Scholars use this term when one text is referenced within another. Sturken and Cartwright state that “in popular culture, intertextuality refers to the incorporation of meanings of one text within another in reflexive fashion.”¹⁶¹ The design team employ similar techniques when marketing LifeGroups. They use the ambiguity of unrelated narratives as a mechanism of persuasion. This strategy might be an effective tool, but its use blurs the boundaries of understanding, which differentiate knowledge from information. As a result, notions of “reality”, “fact” and “fiction” merge, break apart, and are re-assembled in ways that asset-strip particular life experiences of their meaning by objectifying meaning and re-investing it into product. In the process, meaning becomes increasingly fragmented through the constant bombardment of advertising claims.¹⁶²

Gunther Kress argues: “In advanced capitalist conditions, the market actively fosters social fragmentation as a means of maximizing the potentials of niche markets.”¹⁶³ In the case of the LifeGroup campaign, the commodification of the idea as a product and the techniques used to market it may actually run counter to the Christian values of personhood and community, the very values EE want to affirm. A Christian understanding of personhood and community lies embedded in the gospel of Christ itself, which defines personhood in relationship to God, others and self (*imago dei*). The act of loving and being loved is participatory; it is not an object that can be commodified. Within the gathered community of Christ, personhood is mutually shared and experienced as *koinonia* (fellowship). This mystery witnesses to the Spirit’s presence of Christ amongst believers and draws them together into community.

¹⁶⁰ See Chapter 2, page 13.

¹⁶¹ Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 446.

¹⁶² Paul Hiebert comments that “[postmodernity] seeks fragmentation, disorder and chaos, and little argument and counterargument. It affirms novelty, eclecticism, fiction, theatre, and ephemerality. Postmodernity rejects as tyrannical the metaphor of knowledge as a photograph. It draws on metaphors of bricolage, patchwork, and collage, which portray diversity and multiple stories.” Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 233.

¹⁶³ “Hence the market has an interest in the development and support of distinct lifestyles, with former (at least partly) ethical concerns swept away.” Gunther R. Kress, *Multimodality: a Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 20.

Marketing the notion of human relationships as an object to be consumed strips our humanity of this meaning (i.e., the possibility of truly knowing and loving the other). Moreover, by reducing love (friendship) to a manageable product, social interactions and personhood are reduced of depth and meaning. Obligation and commitment to the other is exchanged for an easy passage to personal happiness and belonging. It is a transaction that reinforces individualism at the expense of social connectedness. This posture compounds further when the experience of deminished personhood intersects Christian community. The mystery of *koinonia* erodes. Participation is replaced by self entitlement which is, in essence, personal happiness and self-gratification measured by the consumer's satisfaction and fulfilment. This posture further erodes the desire and obligation of congregants towards the other.

The loss of personhood and community were not noticeably evident when observing EE, however the adoption of advertising practices by the organisation do make it vulnerable to the fragmented lifestyle practices broadly evident within popular culture. John Kavanaugh expresses the fragmented character of culture by stating:

Living only to labour and to cling to the products of our labour, we recreate ourselves in the image and likeness of the product. We alienate ourselves from each other in competition and in the struggle for possession and profit. We become alienated from our own humanness ... We no longer speak of our being or perceive our personhood. Human relations, activities, qualities become thing-like relationships, actions and qualities.¹⁶⁴

This mode of being is closely connected with an advertising culture that is built upon the consumption of commodities. Within this field, a commodity is an object of visual attraction that transforms consumption into a form of visual pleasure where the value is "a self-gratification of the visual senses and by extension, the physical senses in general."¹⁶⁵ This means the product being promoted rests on the visual pleasure derived from the advertising and its ability to arouse a pleasurable experience for the

¹⁶⁴ John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*, 25 Anniversary (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 110.

¹⁶⁵ Dunn, *Identifying Consumption*, 109.

consumer. The underlying cultural principle is performativity.¹⁶⁶ Dunn explains: “By implication, this means that consumption practices are increasingly motivated by a search for entertainment and fun.”¹⁶⁷ The transmission of these consumptive values lie embedded in the techniques that constitute advertising practices. Through advertising images, consumptive ideals are realised in that they become a powerful medium of imaginary pleasure. These forces go undetected by the design team because the dominant cultural landscape camped around the desires and pleasures of self have slipped into their consciousness almost unnoticed.

I am not suggesting such characteristics are a reflection of EE but I am arguing that powerful undisclosed forces are at work in the use of visual media. Under the umbrella of consumerism, these forces lie hidden, below the surface only to reappear amongst congregants as unrelated consumptive behaviours; i.e., I will choose to participate if what is offered is entertaining and fun, has sensual appeal, is new and novel, and promises some discrete pleasure associated with its function.¹⁶⁸ The implications of consumerism at this level are not just about the influence of ideas, but the framing of basic human desire. Given that consumerism leverages human dissatisfaction and craving, the propensity to work harder in order to earn more for things we feel we need in order to be happy is relentless. This leaves people anxious, unsure of their identity and their relationships to others, restless and dissatisfied with their station in life. The default position is to embrace more of what the market promises, an externalisation of the individual self towards advertising images that become “a powerful medium of imaginary pleasure.”¹⁶⁹ All this means that there is a need for discerning minds and processes that can monitor seductive elements, as well as re-shape media technologies so they strengthen Christian virtues and practices rather than undermine them.

¹⁶⁶ “Performativity implies that identity is executed through behaviour or action, carrying connotations of role playing or script enactment. [Moreover, it] has a subsidiary meaning reflecting the supremacy of visual experience in consumer culture.” Ibid., 163.

¹⁶⁷ Dunn states: “Consistent with the emphasis in consumer culture on sensory experience, the notion of performance suggest identity formation takes place within the boundaries of what is known only through the physical senses.” Ibid., 163.

¹⁶⁸ Dunn states the pleasure value of a commodity depends upon three major criteria: its “sensual appeal,” “functional effects,” and “novelty.” Ibid., 109-110.

¹⁶⁹ Dunn, *Identifying Consumption*, 111.

Two visuals of significance for EE are the “Reach Serve Influence” image, and the scriptural text (Jeremiah 29:11) that forms a static display above the entrance doors to the auditorium. Both help frame an institutional understanding of EE’s vision where it is presumed that as long as the design team is working within the scope of and towards EE’s vision, they are the ones with the educational skill, and therefore the discretion, to know best how to use visual media and promote EE’s life to the congregation. It is on this premise that the design team is unwittingly placed in a position where their decisions on the use of visual media may have exponential influence. That is to say, they may be shaping congregants simply by their editorial decisions and marketing practices while appearing consistent with EE’s vision.

This criticism is not to discredit the design team nor question their skill, dedication or commitment to the organisation, but rather is an attempt to identify inadequacies of an overly-casual structure, which basically gives visual media a blank page upon which to write its own game plan. This structure, while possibly unaware of the wisdom needed to navigate those forces that now permeate popular culture, is alert to public perceptions and the need to manage public impressions. When I interviewed Luke, he expressed this sentiment. He spoke of “doing things well” and decisions that had been made in the early days of EE, when decisions were made about a building. He said “we put up a building that architecturally complemented the people we were attempting to reach.” Concern about image and public impressions is justifiable given the power advertising has in attracting clientele. Given EE’s vision and desire to attract the unchurched, a need for those specialised in the delivery of high-quality visual media became inevitable. When I asked Mary about the design department and its history, she explained the ministry was something that had “evolved over time”. However, the development of a specialised staff that have tertiary qualifications fitting their roles has been a more recent and intentional development. This has meant employing staff who do not attend EE, although both attend other churches close by. This is an interesting turn given the level of discretion the design team has over visual media and the decisions they make, which may indirectly impact congregant life and identity. Especially concerning is the importation of secular practices that carry with them their own epistemological and ontological frames. This raises questions concerning visual

media and how to maintain institution integrity. It also voices concern about the structural processes of EE and the level of oversight given by leadership.

Heidi Campbell comments that while “technology provides certain benefits for the community it may introduce dangers to its members.”¹⁷⁰ In her study, she found that “when religious communities must make choices about why, how, and in what contexts they will engage with new media, they undergo a complex process of assessment.”¹⁷¹ This is outlined at the end of Chapter 2. When I applied Campbell’s model to EE (described in Chapter 2), I found that there were no evident processes by which EE could monitor its adoption of visual technologies and ascertain its effects. Interviews with leadership and those on the design team gave no indication that there was space or dialogue given to the religious *history and tradition* of EE in order to establish *communal precedents* for its use of visual technologies – stage one of Campbell’s model. While all concerned embodied the cause of EE, there was no narrative (informal or otherwise) on how EE’s *core values and patterns of behaviour* might be affected by the use of visual media – stage two of Campbell’s model. Rather, an excitement as to the possibilities of new forms of visual gadgetry filled the conversation. Barbara (Media and Publicity overseer) expressed this sentiment when speaking of iPads and how they could be used to download the sermon during a service. While those interviewed were able to identify EE’s values and articulate them within the suite of images exhibited, there was no indication of a *negotiation process* (conversation, dialogue or otherwise) that made reference to the religious history and tradition of the church – stage three of Campbell’s model. Moreover, there was no indication of any *ongoing shared narrative* that could frame an *existing discourse* around the use of visual media – stage four of Campbell’s model. Overall, there seemed to be little understanding of the social and religious implications this ministry might have upon the congregation, other than those of technical, pragmatic and strategic concern. While Campbell model’s exposes serious gaps in the organisation making EE vulnerable, it does offer a way forward for EE to engage visual media and competently grapple with the challenges visual technologies present.

¹⁷⁰ Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 5.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

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.¹⁷² 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.¹⁷³ 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. To explore this claim and discuss whether EE is vulnerable, we will explore the responses of ten congregants who were interviewed regarding various images used by EE.

¹⁷² James Hopewell describes four approaches from which one can examine a local church. These approaches include: 1) contextual, 2) mechanical, 3) organic, and 4) symbolic. Mechanist approaches focus on program effectiveness. Hopewell states, "The Church Growth Movement has best captured mechanist hopes for competent congregations." James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 19, 24.

¹⁷³ Hopewell goes on to state: "[A symbolic] approach considers the congregation less a texture or machine or organism than a discourse, an exchange of symbols that express the views, values, and motivation of the parish." He argues: "While other approaches explore, respectively, the context, effectiveness, and communal development of the congregation, the symbolic outlook instead focuses upon identity." *Ibid.*, 28-29

Chapter 5: The effect of visuals on congregants

The focus of this section is data obtained from the second cycle of interviews. The overarching theme to emerge from the data was the effectiveness of EE's visual media upon congregants. In every interview, the values, beliefs and identity of EE were readily spoken of by respondents. Responses to the nine visuals (see Appendix) by the interviewees were consistent throughout. Each spoke candidly of themes that were listed in the branding guide. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the influence of these visuals upon congregants and identify two reoccurring sub-themes within the data that demonstrate the effectiveness of EE's visual media. Alongside these themes are muted responses indicative of concerns expressed by participants about specific elements of visual media they found counter-productive. This is followed by a critical analysis of these findings, which identify specific challenges related to the use of visual media as a means of communication.

5.1 The effectiveness of visual media

One reoccurring theme was the positive vibe participants felt towards EE. Evidence suggests that there is a strong correlation between EE's use of visuals and the positivity expressed by respondents. When congregants were asked what they valued about EE, their responses were remarkably alike. The repetition of such words as friendly, positive, energetic, fun, relaxed, community, family, relevant and multi-ethnic were common to all. The striking aspect of this detail is the correlation noted between the contents of the Brand Guide (namely its list of words voicing "company values") and the values expressed by interviewees towards the church.¹⁷⁴ That is to say, they were the same. This congruity suggests an important relationship exists between congregational identity and images expressing congregational life.

Another aspect of this congruity was expressed when interviewees were questioned about what they thought the overarching message of the EE was. The question was asked with no visual prompts given. Interestingly, six out of ten participants responded similarly, with "Reach Serve Influence". This image features repeatedly across the visual landscape of EE. It appears as a static display inside the church auditorium, but is

¹⁷⁴ Elim Christian Centre, *Brand Guide*, 7.

also used repeatedly as a framing device to prompt and close the Sunday PowerPoint presentations. It also features on EE's website front page, as well as on printed materials that advertise and promote church activities. Respondents were enthusiastic about the slogan and believed it communicated the message of the church in a positive way to outsiders, adding that it gave EE "a consumer-friendly face". All ten participants had a clear understanding of the words and what they meant. While the response of four interviewees to EE's overarching message differed from the six already mentioned, all ten did share a common voice in naming values that were listed in the Brand Guide under the guise of "company values".

A further indication of congregant positivity was evident when interviewees were presented with a suite of nine images. Each of the nine images can be found in the Appendix. The broad adoption of visual media by EE to communicate information and sell its ideas appeared to generate an air of positivity amongst those interviewed. They liked the bright colours, their appeal to adolescents and children, the relevant feel, the use of words and phrases like "a future and hope", "doing life together" and "you are invited". Each of these triggered feelings of excitement, novelty and fun. This was very evident in relation to the Sunday video clips. Interviewees found this form of media the most exciting as it was bright, energetic, entertaining and life-giving. Most acknowledged that this mode of communication was the most effective source of receiving information, as well as the most influential platform for communication. As one participant commented: "If it is on a Sunday PowerPoint clip, it must be important." The general consensus of participants towards EE's use of visual media was expressed in the notion that they belonged to a church they were proud of because it was perceived to be in step with popular culture. One participant captured this feeling when he commented that "this is what Church should be like ... passion comes through media." The same person also commented that it was not an image that attracted him to EE rather it was what he felt. It is a comment that suggests a non-cognitive way of seeing the world – a world in which feeling manifests itself as desire.

Another aspect of EE's visual effectiveness was the subtle influences images had upon congregants. This was particularly evident in the way advertising was able shape the imagination and point desire. An example in point is EE's use of advertising to re-

envision its small group ministry. As noted on page 41, small groups were re-branded as LifeGroups. Its promotion effectively stimulated fresh interest and persuaded congregants to join up. When interviewing participants the phrase “DOING LIFE TOGETHER” popped up frequently as a way of voicing Christian life and their belonging to EE.¹⁷⁵ Responses ranged from “I want to participate” to “Every time I see the LifeGroup ad I feel I need to get involved.” One interviewee commented that “LifeGroup is mentioned often.” This was quickly followed by “it is very important to me.” Such comments reflected a sense of desire – a way of seeing the world and a way of belonging to EE.

Another image embedded in the imagination of congregants was the visual embodiment of the biblical text – Jeremiah 29.¹⁷⁶ The image appeared to resonate deeply among those interviewed. Aspirations seemed internalised around feelings of hope and assurance of God’s individual plan for their lives. There was no awareness expressed concerning the historicity of the text, nor its canonical significance. The power of this image seemed to lie in its creative genius to incite responses such as: “I love it being up there because it’s encouraging ... it reminds me that God wants to prosper me.” Another interviewee commented that it was a phrase that “comes up all the time.” The same interviewee, an immigrant from South Africa, said she found the image very reassuring because “we know our family has settled in the right place.” Others commented that it gave them a sense of belonging. The response was intuitive, underwritten by an inner orientation of hope and the promise of secured future.

5.2 Muted responses: 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 fell into one of two categories: 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.

¹⁷⁵ The capitalised letters that make up the phrase are part of the LifeGroup logo and branding.

¹⁷⁶ Most interviewees were aware of the 2008 Mangatepopo canyoning tragedy and the importance of this text to EE. It could be that this incident registered deeply within the life of EE and now frames a communal consciousness that rallies affection and sees ways this visual text can generate hope.

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 (which also features as a billboard on the property road-front), 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. 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. While all identified with the slogan as a value of EE, feelings of distance and disconnection were evident in such disparaging responses as: "it looks fake and superficial – Americanised ... all these smiling people ... it's not true. Everybody looks so happy ... that's not real life." These comments and others indicate a measure of discomfort. They have the potential to erode trust and invoke a hermeneutic of suspicion when deciphering information.

The second category of feeling was the uncertainty and distrust 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. One interviewee spoke candidly about her church friends and their experience of LifeGroup. She said, "I know LifeGroup is 'the big push' but the concept is here and the reality is over there." Her friends saw the promotion, were excited by the concept and responded, but were left disappointed when the flyer they filled in was never followed up. She said: "They say a LifeGroup is happening every moment of the day. But this is hardly true when they haven't enough groups to place people." The interviewee herself was very positive about LifeGroup, which suggests her comments were not aimed at the program, but rather at the misleading manner of its promotion. On another occasion, when the same visual was presented to another interviewee, the response was one of enthusiasm for the concept but tempered by experiences of not being able to access materials off the church's website, which had

been promised in the advertising. This did not undermine the LifeGroup brand but it did erode confidence in the image as an index marker on the site itself. The interviewee commented that “sometimes it is not up to date ... I relied on it for LifeGroup but it wasn’t there so I have low expectations.” This raised questions of integrity around some of the advertising for the interviewee, who saw a gap between the claims made and reality.

Another thread of dissonance, which appeared to be of lesser concern (even hidden) but was nevertheless in the conversation, was the dominance of secular imagery at the exclusion of Christian imagery. Generally, attitudes were ambivalent towards Christian imagery. One interviewee, when shown an image of the Ministry Training College logo, stated that he identified with the cross in the logo because it was informal, contemporary and fun. However, in the same breath he said: “I don’t see myself as religious, and as such, I stay away from ‘old religion’.” His inference seemed to suggest Christian images had little to say to contemporary culture and that it represented an old form of Christianity, which was ritualistic and distant. In the midst of this conversation, he said that “EE didn’t use Christian symbolism in the form of images.” He explained that, “Luke doesn’t like the symbolic,” and went on to say that “even a cross at the centre of Church” was a hindrance. He said that “Luke believes visuals get in the way of meeting with God himself.” Despite this position, many of the interviewees strongly identified with the image of a cross as an anchor affirming their faith.

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. Participants commented that a lot of baggage existed around religious imagery. One person stated that he felt religious images had

tainted the message. The group as a whole were comfortable with EE's position on the basis that the message of Christ needed to be packaged in such a way that it was inviting. One participant commented that "we need to talk to people in a way they understand ... so we don't use church language." Ironically, the group also felt there was a need to use Christian images in the church as a way of nurturing believers and deepening their faith. They saw the use of both secular and Christian images on the same continuum, rather than one category (secular) excluding the other (Christian).

5.3 What the interviews reveal

The above data is revealing in as much as it 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", which frames culture.¹⁷⁷ 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.¹⁷⁸

These issues are more widely informed by an understanding of the human person as a creature of desire rather than a "thinking thing" given to ideas and theories.¹⁷⁹ James K. Smith argues this point in his book *Desiring the Kingdom* – that "our identity is shaped by what we intimately love."¹⁸⁰ In other words, "desire is a (largely implicit) vision of what we hope for, what we think the good life looks like."¹⁸¹ Smith goes on to argue that "all societies and communities are animated by a social imaginary – it's the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings."¹⁸² According to Smith: "[this] social imaginary is made up of the stuff that funds the imagination – stories, myths,

¹⁷⁷ Kress, *Multimodality*, 51.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁷⁹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 40.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 65.

pictures.”¹⁸³ This is a significant point because “the social imaginary” funding the imagination of those interviewed was heavily influenced by certain images chosen by the organisation to tell its own story and, by inference, the gospel story. As Smith explains, “Because visual and visceral media operate on our imaginary more than our intellect – because they seep into our imagination – they are slowly and often surreptitiously absorbed into our *kardia*, into the very nerve centre of how we orient ourselves.”¹⁸⁴ This perspective validates the argument that EE’s use of visuals shape congregants into a certain kind of people without them realising it.

This is achieved by EE adopting strategies from the advertising world and using them to market its own activities, programs and culture. In this way, EE is able to construct its own imaginary world where human fulfilment is configured in accordance with the affections of the organisation. Such affections are precognitive. They register at an unconscious level and touch the nerve ends of desire, out of which the congregation responds and voices its identity. The effectiveness of these strategies is without question but their effectiveness may go well beyond the explicit orientation to which EE intends. While the use of advertising strategies give EE a competitive edge and a plausible structure in which to work, other less desirable forces also register in the unconscious minds of congregants. This is because advertising techniques also work at the level of the adaptive unconsciousness. Danesi states that “[advertising] techniques have become so common that they are no longer recognized consciously as stratagems. Advertising has become the fuel for an entertainment-driven society that seeks artifice as part of its routine of escapism from the deeper philosophical questions that would otherwise beset it.”¹⁸⁵ These comments draw attention to the subversive power of the advertising industry and the way it indulges public imagination with images of both self-interest and self-absorption. In this schema, happiness, fulfilment and pleasure are exaggerated by the use of visual techniques and images that enable the viewer to transcend their own reality. It is a visual landscape that seeps into our fundamental way of perceiving the world. The quest for fulfilment is only ever momentary, experienced in some corresponding act of consumption. All this to say, if EE is to

¹⁸³ Ibid., 66.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 96.

¹⁸⁵ Danesi, *Understanding Media Semiotics*, 199.

remain faithful in its calling and stay true to its Kingdom vision of “Reach Serve Influence”, it would do well to critically consider its adoption of those strategies drawn from the advertising world to promote its life.

Given the affective influence images have on a congregation, EE’s decision to use generic photos of people to populate its website home-page, instead of images of people from out of its own congregational context, was met with apprehension and discomfort. The employment of stock photos instead of actual congregant photos to illustrate EE’s ethnic diversity was considered ambiguous and somewhat misleading. The effect upon interviewees was one of confusion as they attempted to reconcile two conflicting claims: “Yes, the church is multiethnic but these people do not represent us.” This conundrum presents a disjunction between the context of production and the context of reception. Guther Kress states in *Reading Images* that “[this disjunction] causes social relations to be represented rather than enacted.”¹⁸⁶ In other words, viewers are under no obligation to respond. Kress states that “whether or not we identify with [the] position [of the visual] will depend on ... our real relation to the producer or the institution he or she may represent, and on our real relation to the others who form part of the context of reception.”¹⁸⁷ According to semiotic theory, communication focuses on the assumed interest of the recipient of the sign. It follows then that the sign needs to be shaped for the person for whom it is intended. As Kress states, “that leads to the demand for transparency in communication.”¹⁸⁸ A lack of transparency creates opacity. In the case of EE, this opacity has the potential to undermine the clarity of the values it wishes to visually communicate. Moreover, when the conflicting elements of an advert are evident, congregational participation becomes increasingly exposed to a hermeneutic of suspicion, which calls into question the reliability of other visual representations of the organisation.

Equally concerning 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.

¹⁸⁶ Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 116.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Kress, *Multimodality*, 71.

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.

This narrative (or modernist paradigm as noted earlier on page 50) 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. This is especially so given that "postmodernity allows us again to speak of spiritual realities, including gods and even God" despite the relativism that now permeates popular culture.¹⁸⁹ In the words of Brian Carroll: "Only something authentic, something that [this generation] sense and see as being indeed part of the world they belonged to, yet pointing beyond it to another, [will] convince and hold them."¹⁹⁰ Such authenticity is to publicly embrace the gospel (our story) and the

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 236.

¹⁹⁰ Brian Carroll, *Moving Between the Times* (New Zealand: The DeepSight Trust, 1998), 170.

images that express its mystery: i.e., authentic community, authentic worship, authentic message and authentic confidence.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 170-171.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

The previous chapters of this research project have demonstrated the influential nature of visual media within a Pentecostal tradition. I began by arguing that the language of “being contemporary” and “relevance” were significant themes within Pentecostal congregations across NZ. This posture, I argued, was characteristic of the tradition; it can adapt quickly to its surroundings, remain fluid and free of dogma, and utilise what the culture has on offer by absorbing those resources it has need of, to exercise its evangelistic mandate and fulfil its missionary vision. I also commented that this disposition perhaps made it vulnerable to the downsides of popular culture.

In Chapter 2, I discussed consumerism, images and how they work, as well as how consumerism is tied to visual technologies through the advertising industry. This provided a platform by which to explore EE in Chapters 3 and 4 to understand the extent of visual media use and its influences upon a Pentecostal congregation. I 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.¹⁹² I also argued that in the public domain of NZ, 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

¹⁹² This is consistent with comments made by Ryan Torma and Paul Emerson Teusner who state: “The tradition of research into the interplay between religion, media and culture recognises that new technologies are never value-free, but enter society laden with cultural values that impact their reception and use. [Moreover] new technologies, when used for religious purposes, have the potential to shift values and meaning related to users’ notions of authentic religious experience, by privileging certain sense, aesthetic values, language and forms of knowledge, over others. Ryan Torma and Paul Emerson Teusner, “iReligion,” *Studies in World Christianity* 17.2 (2011): 137-155.

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.

Throughout the interview process, the word “relevant” was frequently used by interviewees to express EE’s ministry activities and identity. This is significant because a critical aspect of social formation is language. Crystal Downing in her book, *Changing Signs of Truth*, makes this point clear when citing C.S. Lewis in *The Silver Chair*: “The Black Knight in the story, believing himself to be an independent agent in control of his thoughts and behaviour, is actually under the spell of a witch; the knight’s very desire to follow the word of the Queen is part of her spell over him.”¹⁹³ Downing continues: “As hard-core structuralists explain it, human desires are not freely chosen [rather] we function UNDER a spell cast by linguistic structures.”¹⁹⁴ This being the case, EE appears to be unconsciously bound by its own commitment to a linguistic structure geared to cultural relevance.

This framework makes it difficult to imagine beyond what Charles Sanders Peirce calls, “collateral experience,” a “previous acquaintance with what the sign denotes.”¹⁹⁵ In other words, we cannot read into any sign what we want; on the contrary, we are predisposed to a “habit of seeing” in a certain way. This “habit of seeing” according to Downing in reference to Peirce’s work, is “an ingrained way of interpreting signs *that is shared by an entire community*.”¹⁹⁶ EE’s commitment to a linguistic structure of relevance by orientation singularly locates its use of signs within a particular matrix of

¹⁹³ Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth*, 126.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 202.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 204. Italics - author’s emphasis.

meanings and reference points. These meanings and reference points are scripted by popular culture around fashion and consumability.

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 new 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."¹⁹⁷ 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"¹⁹⁸ 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.

This concern points to the importance of visual media and the way it functions within a Christian community not only to *inform* but to *form* both congregants and ecclesial identity. While visual technology in its present high-tech form is a recent innovation within Pentecostal churches, the use of images and the application of them by various church traditions within culture have long been associated with Christianity. For nearly 2000 years, images and symbols have been used to communicate Christian truth and disciple believers. William Dyrness in his book *Poetic Theology* provides insight into this practice. He argues that "humans cannot live without symbolism; ... humans inevitably

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 30.

¹⁹⁸ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 65-66.

shape symbols of their environment by a particular extension of their calling, as God's image, to name creation." ¹⁹⁹ Calvin argued that we invariably use our naming capacity to make images into idols, yet this tendency does not necessarily make "our symbolic proclivity evil or irredeemable." While Christian history is not silent as to the church's own apostasy in this regard, its use of images in forming Christian life and character ought not to be maligned. Images and symbols have played an intrinsic role in forming Christian communities through the ages and still continue to do so. They provide a sense of shared identity both in the present and with the past, as well as enabling communities to imagine the future together. Images of Christian generosity, hospitality, respect, charity and mystery expressed in visual forms characteristic of their time, have renewed and inspired other believers to re-imagine themselves and imitate what has happened before. They have taken an image and re-signed it in a new way. This suggests visual media can play an important role in Christian discipleship, both in forming congregants, as well as forming a congregation's identity. In the concluding paragraphs, I would like to make several recommendations in response to the findings of this study. I would also like to suggest that these recommendations are starting points that necessitate further investigation in light of ongoing research.

The first recommendation is that EE consider a structure that could thoughtfully and robustly monitor its creative and enterprising use of visual media. This recommendation is offered in view of those findings which reveal: 1) EE's pragmatic but limited understanding around the influence of advertising and the long-term impact this may have upon congregants and the integrity of the organisation; and 2) EE's utilitarian approach to visual media, that is, EE's pragmatic adoption and use of secular images and its indifference to images that characterise historical Christianity. With no apparent way to monitor the application of visual technologies, EE is in need of a governing structure that could vet its media production and thoughtfully advise those undertaking the creative task. The work of Heidi Campbell, which was used in this thesis, could provide the kind of robust framework needed to monitor and better shape those visual technologies EE seeks to adopt and utilise to promote its life and

¹⁹⁹ William A. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 56.-57.

vision. This recommendation has its own set of complexities and does raise questions worthy of further research and reflection.

Another recommendation is that EE audits its use of images and explores the role that images within the Christian tradition could have on its own Christian discipleship strategies, the formation of congregants, and its institutional identity. Some consideration needs to be given to the influence of popular culture, in particular the way secular images are used by the advertising industry to frame language and create a social environment where meaning is defined by consumption. Further thought needs to be given to how EE could re-sign notable images of the faith in ways that could empower its congregants to be confident in proclaiming the good news of the Christ story. This would help dissolve the dualism that was voiced by congregants, who felt they had to be bilingual to reconcile a perceived sacred-secular divide. A loss of confidence in proclaiming the gospel publicly was evident in the interviews, which in conversation was related to language; they did not feel confident to speak about the gospel in the public domain due to an implausibility of language to do so. In a culture increasingly given to visual representations, images have a significant place. The effort and energy EE puts into visual media is evidence of the fact. While most Pentecostals and conservative Evangelicals are resistant to those parts of Christianity that embody Christian symbols and images, recognition must be given to the importance of image and symbolism now permeating popular culture. William Dryness, while recognising visible representation has always been difficult for Protestants (especially among Evangelical groups), argues that “today the challenge is especially acute.”²⁰⁰ He presses this point by arguing that within popular culture, especially amongst the younger generations, “there is an increasingly urgent desire for images that capture something of the depth and beauty of life, for practices and that can structure one’s life and spark affection... Religion has always been the custodian of such symbols, yet the sad fact is that few people turn to the church for such symbols today.”²⁰¹ For EE, this is an area worthy of further reflection and thought. This is particularly so in view of EE’s talented and resourceful design team who are dedicated to their faith and their discipline.

²⁰⁰ Dryness, *Poetic Theology*, 220.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Pentecostal congregations such as EE face formidable challenges when using visual media and accompanying technologies. I have argued that EE's life and identity as a congregation are being unconsciously shaped by secular forces. The analytical frame proposed by Heidi Campbell (used in this thesis) offers a fitting a tool for EE to adopt as it faces the realities of a visually consumptive culture and thinks through its own use of visual technology. These challenges call upon leadership to be theological astute, culturally discerning, and constantly in conversation with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Henri Nouwen refers to Christian leadership as a "divine vocation" that allows the leader "to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and to bring the light of Jesus there."²⁰² The permeable nature of visual technology is subtle and relentless; displaying a glitter difficult to resist that may lead congregations down paths where they really don't want to go.

²⁰² Henry Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), 22.

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Appendix: Images presented to congregants when interviewed

Image 1: Vision Statement



Image 2. Elim Logo



Image 3: Scriptural Text – Jeremiah 29: 11

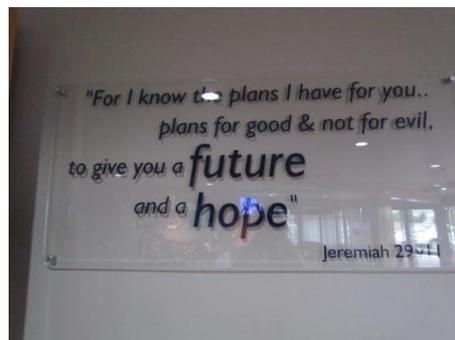


Image 4: LifeGroup brand



Image 5: Children's ministry

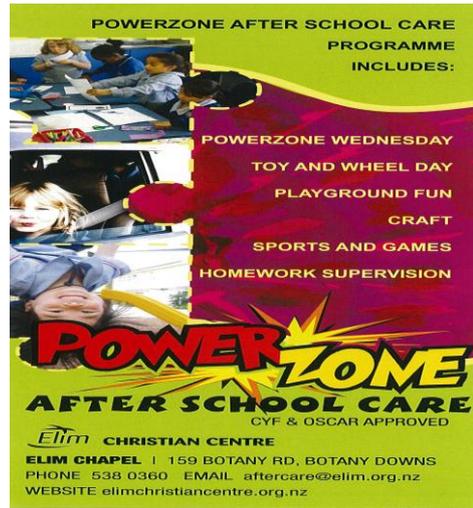


Image 6: Youth Ministry

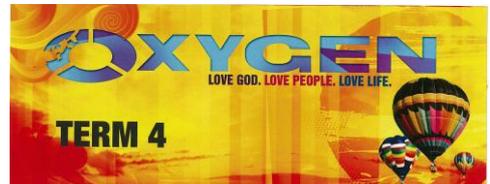


Image 7: Ministry Training College (MTC)



Image 8: Website home page



Image 9: Sunday Notices – Digital Projection

