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Communicating church branding through anniversary services

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ABSTRACT

COMMUNICATING CHURCH BRANDING
THROUGH ANNIVERSARY SERVICES

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This study provides an analysis of communication as presented through church anniversary services. The paper includes a discussion on organizational branding, which is then applied to religious organizations and, more specifically, the megachurch. Anniversary services to be analyzed originate from Willow Creek Community Church of South Barrington, Illinois and include those presented during the years 2011 to 2015. These services are employed as a case study through which communication is analyzed in two primary ways: first, as part of a church organizational branding process and second, through a lens of community-building ritual communication (per James Carey and Eric Rothenbuhler). Attention is given to how communicated messages are tailored to two main audiences: those who already ascribe to the Christian faith and those who do not.

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COMMUNICATING CHURCH BRANDING

THROUGH ANNIVERSARY SERVICES

BY

KATE E. MEAD

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1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to consider the influence of branding on one particular Christian church in America through its recent anniversary services. Rather than assuming the church is immune to and without need of the capitalistic tendencies of sales and corporate competition, it is the intention of this paper to perform a case study that analyzes how Willow Creek Community Church of South Barrington, Illinois benefits greatly from a particular brand, particularly as expressed through recent anniversary services which act as a microcosm for the expression of over-arching church purpose. The presented brand serves as an observable and recognizable identity of the church which both identifies it with and isolates it from fellow churches. In addition, the brand also allows the church to identify with and isolate it from contemporary secular culture. What results is a church defined by a brand with a unique relationship to the collective Christian community as well as with the culture of the secular world. This paper will study several recent anniversary services of Willow Creek in order to identify particular branding messages that are postured to foster a religious community reaching those outside and inside the already-established church body. The two main research questions of this inquiry are:

1. How does Willow Creek Community Church use its anniversary services to brand itself as a church that identifies with and separates itself from secular culture?

2. How does Willow Creek Community Church use its anniversary services to brand itself as a church that identifies with and separates itself from Christianity in general?

Brief Outline of Chapters

Chapter one will begin with an overview of the study. A discussion of branding will be followed by its application to the religious world, with a particular focus on Protestantism in America. The chapter continues with a discussion of megachurches, including an introduction of the megachurch being studied, Willow Creek Community Church. The chapter will also focus on the choice of using the anniversary service as the text available for analysis.

Chapter two will summarize the study's method, as well as the paper's approach to analysis. A theoretical framework will be built by combining Kenneth Burke's concept of identification with theoretical literature on communication as ritual, as outlined by theorists such as James Carey, Eric Rothenbuhler, and Nick Couldry. This framework will be positioned to apply the use of communication as ritual as a tool for encouraging identification with the church message. The spoken and performed communication presented by Willow Creek's anniversary services will then be analyzed through the lens of intentional community-building as enacted through various means of communication.

Chapter three will provide an analysis of the anniversary services by seeking to answer my first research question: How does Willow Creek Community Church use its anniversary services to brand itself as a church that identifies with and separates itself from secular culture? Many contemporary and secular aspects of the anniversary services will be analyzed in order to

understand Willow Creek's positioning of itself within the world at large.

Chapter four will provide an analysis of the anniversary services by seeking to answer my second research question: How does Willow Creek Community Church use its anniversary services to brand itself as a church that identifies with and separates itself from Christianity in general? Here the paper will seek to discover how Willow Creek postures itself within the larger Christian community, both identifying with and distancing itself from that larger community in an attempt to foster a particular church brand for itself.

Lastly, chapter five will summarize the findings of the study.

Branding – A Summary

There are few things as synonymous with capitalistic society as marketing. Consumer goods flood the market and the future of each item relies almost entirely on advertising. The latest technology and even basic needs like food and shelter are commodities sold via the marketplace and these selling techniques primarily revolve around one concept: story (Cooke, 2012; Twitchell, 2004a; Twitchell, 2004b). In the world of marketing and advertising, it is the story that sells. It is the story that creates and fosters a particular culture which can then be attributed to the item up for sale. Advertising lends meaning and does so by connecting a particular desired culture, with a *thing* that an organization wants sold (Twitchell, 1996). For instance, Nike's "Just Do It" slogan paints the picture of ability without limits. It sells a lifestyle. That concept connects the common cultural desire for athletic achievement with a *thing*. It implies that buying Nike's apparel and equipment is the way to reach physical goals. It connects

the established culture's love for a champion with the purchasable item(s) labeled with the Nike Swoosh. In another example, Disneyland's "The Happiest Place on Earth" slogan tells the story of childhood joy. Cultural concepts like the American Dream come to life in the minds of audiences when Disney is pitched as a place where happiness and success abound. Disney's presented story taps into the cultural desire of achieving anything one aspires to (which also fits quite well with Walt Disney's own personal story of accomplishment). Disney also taps into the American *Family* Dream. What family doesn't dream of a vacation with no whining, no child melt-downs, and no distressed children in the back seat of the vehicle? Happiness is a story. We dream of happiness. As a result, Disney's intentional storytelling implies it can be achieved – at Disneyland. The story aims for this appeal and vision. In each of these examples the consumer is placed inside a story – a devised identity. Consumers are running a marathon or slam dunking a basketball. They are vacationing joyously with no crying or complaints from children. They are placed into a story – and that story sells.

Beyond just the story, however, is another important and essential element. The story sells primarily because of the corporate identity or brand behind the story (Kowalczyk & Pawlish, 2002). For instance, Nike's sponsorship of exceptional world athletes lends itself to the idea that a person *can* "just do it" because "it" is being done currently around the globe. Nike sells a lifestyle, not just a product. Disney's dedication to providing exceptional customer service, streamlining attractions and events, and offering unique and 'magical' experiences contributes significantly to the ability of the story ("the happiest place on earth") to be believable. All actions contribute to the brand Disney wants its customers to buy into: they are the happiest place on earth and all interactions with the customer should make that brand

believable. If an organization is aiming for consumer loyalty, crux of the matter is the brand (Chajet & Shachtman, 1991; Fombrun, 1996; Rowden, 2000).

The term brand can be defined as a concept similar to an identity. Albert & Whetten (1985) posit that the identity (or brand) of an organization is something of its essence, or the central character of the organization and one that displays a degree of sameness and continuity over time (p. 265). It is, however, potentially much more complex an identity than one may first assume. In his book, *The Art of Identity*, Mark Rowden (2000) explains the concept of a brand through the metaphor of a potato. Loose and unmarked potatoes may be sold in any number of marketplaces in America and, as such, may at first glance seem little more than what they clearly are: potatoes. However, aspects such as the appearance of the potato, the environmental situation inside which the potato sits (the marketplace in general) and the aesthetic display of the potato sale (the location of the potato within the marketplace) all influence the brand of the potato. Well-known marketplaces may contribute to a more appealing potato than a lesser-known marketplace, prior experiences of consumers with potatoes at this particular marketplace will also contribute to the vegetable's branding. In addition, the naming of the potato may add to its appeal or lack thereof. Consider, for instance, the labels of organic or farm-fresh, or even variety names such as russet, Yukon gold, or red potatoes. All labels, presentations, and surrounding verbiage influence the brand of the potato as much as (or perhaps more so than) the appearance of the potato itself. It is, in fact, how a product is *presented* that often sells or does not sell the item in question. This presentation is a type of rhetorical message, influenced by a number of factors including linguistic (words), visual (sights), aural (sounds), gestural (movement), and spatial (placement) choices (Arola, Sheppard, & Ball, 2014). In the example of

the potato, the linguistic choices of the potato's labeling and its spatial positioning within the store or within the produce section affect how the potato is viewed and, thus, branded. Visual presentation including colors, display cases, and signage add to the brand. Aural aspects and gestural aspects may also be present if sound or movement are included in the presentation. Each of these aspects adds to the presentation – and the presentation provides either a successful or unsuccessful brand.

Disneyland may claim to be the "happiest place on earth," but without intentional branding that sends appropriate linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial messages to the intended audience, the chosen brand would fall flat. And without successful presentation of being the "happiest place on earth," Disneyland may be little more than just another theme park visited purely for its thrill rides. Nike's shoes would be less without the identity or brand that the "just do it" slogan implies and then provides through advertising messages that, again, use these rhetorical tools to send messages to its chosen audience. As Chajet and Shachtman (1991) note, a corporation's identity is the tool used to shape perceptions of any given product or service. A product is not separate from its parent company's identity (Kowalczyk & Pawlish, 2002). The brand chosen to represent the company and the brand chosen to represent the good or service are affected by one another. In some cases, they are even the same as one another.

It is important to note that the concept of a brand is much more than a marketing or advertising scheme. Where advertising attempts to sell an object and may rely on individual ad attempts to do so, branding is more encompassing. According to Fournier and Lee (2009), it is important for an organization to build a brand community: a "group of ardent consumers organized around the lifestyle, activities, and ethos of the brand" (para. 1). Fournier and Lee

(2009) also claim that brand communities are not synonymous with advertising or marketing. Rather, the concept of a brand and the way it builds a community is a more over-arching business approach. A brand community connects the company with its customers, and serves them by meeting consumer needs rather than selling a product merely to benefit the company. The difference here is a stark one: advertising sells things, branding and the resulting brand communities meet needs. Rather than remaining business-centric, the concept of branding aims to focus on the consumers and how they can be best served by an organization.

This concept of branding, which falls within the realm of both product and parent company originated in the consumer market of goods. However, it is no less true or effective in the world of beliefs and values. According to James Twitchell (2004a), organizations such as museums, schools, and even churches brand in order to better offer their products to consumers. For these organizations that aim to serve communities often without the selling of goods, branding is an important tool. For the purposes of this paper, the discussion will now turn its attention to religion. As with any other good or service, options abound within any given religion. It is the intention of branding to use stories to separate similar religious offerings and point a particular consumer toward a particular choice – a sort of customization of a product/service (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). As Mara Einstein (2008) states, "religion is a product, no different from any other commodity sold in the consumer marketplace" (2008, p. 4). As such, the concept of building a brand community is important and applicable to various religious offerings.

Identifying with Religion

At a basic level, religion is participatory. Without voluntary participation from members, religious groups would not last a year let alone decades, centuries, or millennia. Interestingly, the nature of this religious participation is widely varied and may include verbally agreeing with the basic belief system of a given religion, participating in religious social events, actively participating in a religion's weekly, monthly, and annual ceremonies and ordinances, and/or actively proselytizing toward those outside of the religious group. In the end, participation is varied but always relies on one commonality: identification with the particular religious group. For the purpose of this paper, focus will now turn to one particular example of this (but by no means the only example): Protestant Christianity.

In the case of Protestantism, the religious group is comprised of individuals who identify themselves with the religion and this identification follows along a sort of religious continuum. On one end of the continuum we have professing Christians whose actions participate meagerly (or not at all) within the religious group. These Christians claim to agree with the basic tenets of the faith, such as belief in Jesus of Nazareth's death on the cross as sufficient atonement for human sins. On the other end of the continuum fall active followers of the faith who enact their beliefs with large scale participation by actively working within the local or even global Christian Church. These members may participate in weekly religious services, proselytize to those outside the Christian faith, and embody a consistent consideration of how to better live out aspects of the faith during everyday life. On one end we have faith. On the other end we have works and actions that are the result of faith. Both exemplify religious participation despite their

varying definitions of what that faith looks like or how it does or does not act. But one commonality between both sides of that scale are undeniable: to belong to a religious group one must identify with that religious group.

A deeper look into religious identification may muddy the waters further: even identification with one particular religion such as Christianity may be comprised of any number of more unique ideals. Views on things including (but certainly not limited to) birth control, homosexuality, local church participation, alcohol consumption, end times judgment, and interaction with non-Christian culture are wildly diverse and create variances and potentially tense debate between Christian identities. Online blogs and forums relate controversies between Christian believers on topics as varied as how much sin is appropriate to watch in films (Block, 2008; Cusey, 2012; Wax, 2014; Wilkinson, 2014), biblical interpretations of Song of Solomon (Reynolds, 2016), and how to write hymns for the church (Ortega, 2011). There is varying opinion on virtually everything within a church. Individuals have preferences on how a preacher should preach. Worship styles are contested within congregations and hinge on significant personal and theological preferences (Hatch, 2014; Johnson, Rudd, Neuendorf, & Jiarr, 2010; Rainer, 2014; Stetzer, 2013).

A wide variety of identities are accepted by individuals as particularly "Christian" despite being, often, diametrically opposed to each other. If, then, Christianity is comprised of individuals identifying with Christianity globally but also uniquely identifying themselves with particular beliefs, traits, and levels of participation, building a cohesive community of these unique members deserves significant attention. The position of the Protestant Christian church (both globally and locally) is to encourage participation in the Christian identity. It is, in

essence, to create a brand community of Christian believers. But how is that participation

encouraged, especially when individuals may hold diverse beliefs and varying levels of

participatory identification?

<div align="center">Religion and Branding</div>

Because of the myriad of religious choices and available ease of viewing these choices

through accessible media outlets, branding is "an essential and vital tool for religious

organisations" (Abreu, 2006, p. 139). The church's need for unifying believers who may

uniquely identify themselves in regard to their own Christianity leads to a potential fusion of

branding and religion – one that has something of a natural fit.

In his book, *Primal Branding*, Patrick Hanlon (2006) identifies seven tenets of branding

that naturally intersect with religion: (a) **creation** tells the story of a product's creation, (b) a

creed is a slogan or tagline that communicates purpose and calls people to action, (c) **icons**

render a visual depiction of a product that leads to instant recognition, (d) **rituals** give meaning

to routine actions, (e) **non-believers** are an identifiable group that helps define what a product is

not, (f) **sacred words** are used to ascribe value to a brand's purposes, and (g) a quality **leader**

provides vision and connection to followers. Brand specialist Martin Lindstrom provides a

similar list comparing religiousness to brand faithfulness. Through neuroscience studies,

Lindstrom (2008) found similar brain activity in devout Christians and committed brand

followers. Lindstrom's book, *Buyology* (2008), describes a study performed in 2006. In this

neuroscientific study, sixteen nuns from the Carmelite order were analyzed by two

neuroscientists from the University of Montreal. The study was intended to record which

portions of the brain respond with neural activity when individuals discuss profound religious

experiences as compared to deep human interaction experiences. The study found that different

parts of the brain were active for each of these two scenarios. Perceived experiences with God

and experiences with human individuals have different patterns of activity within the brain.

While no one spot in the brain reacted particularly to religious considerations, the study did find

that "when it comes to religion and faith, a number of integrated, interconnected brain regions

work simultaneously and in tandem" (p. 108). Later, when Lindstrom considered the willingness

of individuals to purchase items that have religious or spiritual significance, he began to consider

the connections that religion and non-religious branding may innately have in common. After

interviewing 14 prominent leaders of various world religions, he discovered a list of nine

characteristics of successful branding that mirror those of religion. They are remarkably similar

to Hanlon's list.

1. A **clear vision** is the cornerstone of religion. Without this vision, one religion (or
   brand) would not stand apart from the rest.

2. A **sense of belonging** displays the place where individuals can become one in a larger
   community.

3. An **enemy** unites a religion by encouraging unification in its distinction from the
   external "enemy."

4. Religion is full of **sensory appeals**. The sights and smells of a religious service
   involve multiple senses in the experience of the religion's brand.

5. **Storytelling** is the basis of religion's oral tradition.

6. **Grandeur** points to grand cathedrals that announce religion's prominence.

7. **Evangelism** is the undeniable power of word-of-mouth promotion.

8. **Symbols** consistently point to a particular religion or brand can be immediately identifiable.

9. **Rituals** are consistent actions that add to the imagery and purpose of religion.

Eventually, in 2007, Lindstrom was led to complete another brain-scan study, this one designed to discover if brain responses to religion and to strong consumer brands (such as Ferrari, Guinness, and Harley Davidson) were similar. The study found that they were (Lindstrom, 2008). The recognition of these natural connections between religion and branding provide a springboard for the topic of this paper, *church* branding. It is this branding that serves combine to religion with branding in order to brand a church so that it may become more identifiable and powerfully effective within its community.

<div align="center">

Christian Church Branding

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Stevens, Louden, Wrenn, and Cole (2006) define the purpose of a church reaching out to its audience as, "the analysis, planning, and management of voluntary exchanges between a church or religious organization and its constituents for the purpose of satisfying the needs of both parties" (p. 77). The authors go on to explain that a church should concentrate "on the analysis of constituents' needs, developing programs to meet these needs, providing these programs at the right time and place, communicating effectively with constituents, and attracting the resources needed to underwrite the activities of the organization" (Stevens, Louden, Wrenn,

& Cole, 2006, p. 77).

This definition is a common theme in church resources and points church organizations toward a need for branding. Many books educate churches on the steps they can use to wield greater influence on the society around themselves. By addressing community demographics, the need for existing *within* a neighboring community, and the differences between growing in numbers and growing in depth, books point to some basic tenets of branding and brand communities (Reising, 2006). They educate churches and church leadership about ways potential attendees (both churched and unchurched) may view their building and services and why it important to consider the brand that a church is portraying to its surrounding community. In a similar vein, Warren (1995) highlights the importance of slogans and stories to succinctly illustrate church identity and purpose. Richard S. Lytle (2010) warns against using a generic brand that does little to identify an individual or church organization from the world around it. Phil Cooke's 2012 book, *Unique*, considers the importance of branding across various media, including mass media and social media. He asserts that design and story must be designed and distributed equally well for an organization to succeed at branding.

Resources such as these allude to the fact that effective church branding contributes to the creation and fostering of a group of like-minded believers who unify within a community, despite differences in particular beliefs. As Stevens, Loudon, Wrenn, and Cole (2006) summarize, churches are comprised of many individuals who each fall in to various segments (or potential segments) of the church congregation. They refer to these as constituents (Stevens, Loudon, Wrenn, & Cole, 2006, p. 24). These segments are identified by various personal factors such as "learning, perception, motivation, attitudes, personality, self-concept, age, life-cycle

stage, occupation, economic situation, and lifestyle" (Stevens, Loudon, Wrenn, & Cole, 2006, p. 25). This is an even deeper piece of the identification realm discussed earlier. Individuals are unique. They hold unique faith beliefs, but also come from unique positions in their individual lives. Each of these things makes for a potentially divisive community. This begs the question: how does a church foster a faith community that is successfully unified if members are not entirely consistent in their beliefs, opinions, and past experiences?

Even more problematic is the case of a church that aims to reach out beyond professing Christians and create a community welcoming not only to a wide variety of Christians, but also to a wide variety of non-believers. Looking back at Stevens, Loudon, Wrenn, and Cole (2006), their chosen phrase "works for, is a member of, attends, supports, or is affected by an organization" (p. 24) is interesting. At a basic level, this definition clearly points to attendees of a particular church (however diverse those attendees maybe). However, the phrase "or is affected by" is an especially important inclusion that points not only to attendees, but also *potential* attendees. The group affected by or influenced by a church is not comprised solely of the weekly attendees of that church. Rather, particular church offerings such as service outreaches, community events, broadcast sermons, or distributed publications may all expand the circle of influence of a particular congregation so it also moves into the surrounding community which is full of *potential* attendees. Church branding attempts to stand in the gap, enabling a church to define and market itself to a variety of potential congregants (Metz, 2007). Once more we see a similarity between church branding and the branding of common goods. An organization markets not only to those already in its fold, but also those who may eventually be brought into its community.

Branding is a tool that complements a religious organization's mission. Some church leaders have adopted this view of church branding and are inclined to use branding terminology to describe their overarching church purpose. Rick Warren's article, "The Purpose-Driven Church" (1995) highlights the importance of a church having a definable and actionable purpose. Though Warren's word choice here is *purpose*, his suggestion of *purpose* is nearly identical to the concept of *brand*. Warren writes of the importance of being able to define what a church's ultimate purpose is in one phrase or sentence. This becomes the brand for that particular church. For example, Warren's congregation (Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California) decided that its purpose was "disciple-development" (Warren, 1995, p. 18). This chosen identity of the church was its *brand* and this brand was instrumental in all decisions and actions made in the future. It aimed to relate to its constituents through this concept of disciple-development. In order to remain identifiable and measurably productive, Saddleback Church was to stay true to its brand so that its congregants and potential congregants would be aware of the church's chosen identity, as well as being served by it.

Similar to the earlier potato analogy, religious organizations are not only viewed as a religious organization (a potato is not just a potato), but are also viewed by members as a brand – a "heterogeneous set of characteristics including its key message, the people who work for it, the place where the services take place, its equipment and all the associations of its offer" (Abreu, 2006, p. 141). In his 2015 article, J. Jacob Jenkins's study of more than 40 church leaders in the Tampa Bay, Florida metro area led to ten categories or brands with which individual leaders may choose to align themselves. Be it commercial, familial, intellectual, intercultural, or a number of other categories, churches are willingly aligning themselves with a particular brand that will

differentiate them from other churches in the immediate vicinity or even across the country/globe (Jenkins, 2015). Branding of a church requires that church to select an identity and foster it. This identity, then, becomes definitional and as individuals seek a church to meet their unique needs, they can more easily match themselves with the brand(s) available at local churches.

Brand strategy requires significant and intentional development and management, but can be immensely effective. Branding requires intentional appeal to an organization's constituents and as such, if done well, branding will both identify needs and provide an effective picture of how the organization has the ability to satisfy those needs (Metz, 2007; Mulyanegara, Tsarenko, & Mavondo, 2011). As Einstein (2008) asserts, brands provide meaning for individuals' lives and then become part of the individual's identity. The successful combination of a particular religious brand with an individual's identity paves the way for "religious brand loyalty" (Mulyanegara, 2011, p. 227) which has the potential to increase a church's membership exponentially. If loyalty can be built between an individual and a particular church, then the loyalty between the two can begin to foster a lasting relationship that results in greater church reach and influence.

Pine and Gilmore (1999) in their book, *The Experience Economy*, discuss the branding concept in a different way. They relate different forms of theatre and acting to the performances that are given by an organization in order to appeal to its customers. Depending on the scenario, a church may find itself needing to make improvisational decisions and communication that relate to specific members or potential members as the situations arise. There are also moments when communication should be completely scripted, including a very planned and intentional purpose that, through its planning, comes across as "fresh and spontaneous" (p. 123). These

different moments of acting/branding may be pieced together "much like a film" (p. 123) in order to create a unified whole of the communication pieces. This unified whole is an important aspect of branding communication. Branding intends to create a community built upon similar ideals and beliefs – a community that is constantly aiming for a more perfect ideal.

This is not the only focus of branding, however. While branding intends to unite potential church attendees – it also intends to differentiate. There is no shortage of Protestant Christian churches in America. Drive down any number of streets in American and there will often be one or more ecclesiastical offerings. Certain portions of the country offer what feels like an innumerable number of church options all within a short driving distance. While branding serves to attract members to a church, it also serves to differentiate one church from others. Liberal protestant churches such as those belonging to the United Church of Christ use branding terms like "Open and Affirming" to differentiate their chosen position on diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions (United Church of Christ, 2017). Certain churches advertise right on their outdoor signage which version of the Bible they adhere to as they preach during services. This is extremely important for those who adhere strictly to the King James Version or require a more modern, adapted version of the Bible. Still other churches take pride in proclaiming an affinity for traditional hymns, while the church down the road may tout itself as offering a more 'contemporary' service. Most of these churches will teach similar messages about Jesus and how they view him to be the Savior sent from heaven. Similarities are present, otherwise they could not all be grouped under the label "Protestant Christianity." But their chosen branding messages also declare differences between the congregations, encouraging potential congregants to select which church bodies align best with

their individual views and beliefs. As Fournier and Lee (2009) point out, "'in' groups need 'out' groups against which to define themselves" (para. 13). Without outsiders, a brand community would not be unified in purpose. It is the ability to say "we're not like that" or "we're not about those things" that helps define an organizational brand.

The next section will begin a discussion on one particular type of Protestant Christian church: the megachurch. Mara Einstein (2008) notes the inevitability of faith branding, since "institutions are competing not only among themselves, but also with the popular culture" (p. xi) and this competition between faith and secular culture led one type of congregation to meet the apparent controversy head on. According to Conrad Ostwalt (2003) certain churches are opening up to secularization, which paves the way for a certain level of conformity to popular culture (p. 57). Megachurches are considered to be at the forefront of this combination of both secular and faith cultures.

<div align="center">The Megachurch</div>

Branding is especially present in what are known as megachurches (Einstein, 2008; Gilley, 2005; Ostwalt, 2003). A megachurch is a Protestant church that averages 2,000 or more attendees each weekend (Gilley, 2005; Sosnik, Dowd, & Fourier, 2006; Thumma & Travis, 2007). Frequently nondenominational, megachurches are viewed as shifting Protestant Christianity away from the large number of diverse Protestant denominations toward a more unified one that is based on the establishment of a new *nondenominational* tradition (Ellingson, 2007). These churches are often evangelical, which means to say that they are relatively

conservative and maintain a focus on evangelism and conversion (Hamilton, 2000). They typically rely on a charismatic leader (pastor) with a natural ability to market their product, which goes far beyond selling the concept of God (Sosnik, Dowd, & Fornier, 2006). Megachurches largely gained in popularity due to the baby boomer generation that widely rejected the Christian religion of their childhood and began a spiritual search for something new but meaningful (Russell, 1993; Gibbs, 2009). Due to their cultural and congregational focus, megachurches began meeting this need. In essence, they have created (and are still creating) a good to be marketed to America. It's a new denomination with a new tradition. According to Aaron B. James (2013), megachurches often offer a wide variety of participatory and service opportunities including family events, recreational sporting leagues, and community-focused outreach ministries. Also characteristic of megachurches are "innovative or progressive" (James, 2013, p. 24) worship services that incorporate a wide variety of multimedia technology and contemporary music stylings. In addition, they have lessons or sermons that are delivered in a very casual and conversational style by a pastor or leader who is dressed casually. This is intended to suggest to members of the congregation that such casual and comfortable dress is not only acceptable, but desirable as well. Beyond their own walls, megachurches also "maintain a high profile through their publishing, leadership conferences, and association of churches that look to them for inspiration and resources" (Gibbs, 2009, p. 87).

So, in a nutshell, the megachurch message is, "We're different. But we're still church." It's an interesting dichotomy that hinges upon 1) continued association with the factions of western Christianity that have been the prevalent mode of Christianity for centuries, and 2) a shift toward a more mainstream and cultural focus. Megachurches typically aim for an appeal

that walks the line between traditional church culture and contemporary popular culture. Conrad

Ostwalt (2003) describes this as the "secularization of traditional religion" (p. 57), noting that it

is not a failure or disappearance of religion, but rather is a "conformity to secular life and to

popular culture" (p. 57). He goes on to state that "Christian tradition has been altered by mass

media, geographical mobility, democratization, and the rapid social change characterizing

contemporary life" (p. 58). Megachurches meet secular appeals with faith-based answers. They

"use television, drama, movies, games, technology, and other brands of secular entertainment to

explore the supernatural" and "to attract those who might otherwise not attend church" (Ostwalt,

2003, p. 58). This inclusion of the secular begins a particular brand within the general

megachurch. It identifies them uniquely (not all churches are so quick to identify with secular

culture) without completely ostracizing them from general Christianity. In the end, certain

churches such as these are significantly marketed and influenced by modern culture (Giggie &

Winston, 2002; Middelmann, 2004; Ostwalt, 2003).

Through attracting church attendees and cultivating individuals' relationships with the

local and global Christian church, megachurches encourage participation and identification –

essential building blocks of effective community. They also distinguish themselves from other

congregations (Tracey, Phillips, & Lounsbury, 2004). Willow Creek Community Church of

South Barrington, Illinois will provide an example of one church that aspires to these things.

Willow Creek Community Church

Willow Creek Community Church began in 1975. A spinoff from a high school youth

group that desired to bring culture and the arts into the church world, Willow Creek originally met in a movie theatre in Palatine, Illinois (Hybels & Hybels, 1995). In the 40 years since, it has become a thriving multi-campus church that welcomes more than 20,000 attendees every weekend. It is an evangelical Christian church that teaches conservatively but is also a unique independent church that does not align itself with any particular denomination. Similar to earlier era megachurches such as Aimee Semple McPherson's Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, its focus is on reaching unchurched members of society and doing so in a way that is contemporary and accessible (Hamilton, 2000). In their book *Rediscovering Church*, Lynne and Bill Hybels (original founders of Willow Creek Community Church) describe several of the reasons that they felt they should begin a new church. First was the described irrelevance of church to daily life. In their experiences, many "unchurched" people cited this as a reason for nonattendance. Second was the perception that church services were lifeless and boring, without any novelty. Additionally, they claim non-attenders cited the prevalence of judgment and condemnation as reasons for lack of church attendance (Hybels & Hybels, 1995). G.A. Pritchard's analysis of Willow Creek's services (1996) introduces some ways that Willow Creek aspired to remedy some of these things. Through interviews and research, he discovered that a significant focus of Willow Creek's weekly services centers around relevant excellence in the arts. Willow Creek specifically aspires to create exceptional music, drama, and presentation that will directly relate to the lives of its attendees (both churched and unchurched). This was the foundation on which the Hybelses and their fellow organizers began building a church. This discovered foundation provides a good beginning glimpse of the intentional branding of Willow Creek Community Church, but in its 40-year history, what sort of branding has remained? It is one thing for a

church to claim that it aspires to a particular brand or presentation style. It is another thing to consistently achieve this in the eyes of audience members. The natural follow-up question becomes: how does Willow Creek identify itself now and is it successful at projecting this identity?

Anniversary Services as Branding

Anniversary services are, at their most basic level, a celebration of the past. To celebrate a marriage is to celebrate 1) the original date of marriage and 2) the years of marriage that have followed. Historical anniversaries do the same. Independence Day in the United States of America is a celebration of the historical victory of independence and the resulting history of the country as an independent nation. The anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birth is annually celebrated to provide a day that is focused on and dedicated to the life he chose to live and the commendable results of that life. In each of these scenarios, portraits of the past inform visions of the future. If a past is considered commendable (and if one is celebrating an anniversary, it likely is) then that past success is used to encourage the furthering of prior accomplishments in a way that enlightens the path of the future. Business anniversaries and graduations follow similar patterns of retrospective admiration and intentional direction for future goals. This paper will turn attention toward the similarly structured church anniversaries and their role in individual church branding.

In his paper documenting anniversary services held by Abbey Congregational Church, Roger Ottewill notes that church anniversaries serve "a variety of purposes" (p. 542). These

purposes include 1) a nostalgic remembrance of earlier achievements, 2) an opportunity for fellowship between attendees combined with solidarity with other congregations, and 3) a chance for leadership or spokespersons to speak of ideas and interests regarding a wide variety of cultural and congregational concerns (Ottewill, 2011). This paper aims to show that the multifaceted nature of anniversaries serves to provide an opportunity for branding the celebrating congregation. Due to the naturally representative nature of anniversary celebrations, the church anniversary service should be an adequate microcosm of an individual church's particular culture and identity – their particular brand. For one looking to understand what a church esteems and values, analysis of its anniversary service should provide a snapshot of the church's purpose. While interviewing church leadership could provide an understanding of what the church's brand is *intended* to be, studying the execution of an anniversary celebration is useful in identifying exactly what branding devices are visible to an audience who may not have foreknowledge of what the services are intended to do. In anniversary services, church leaders consciously or subconsciously choose what has been important in their past years and relate this to their audience through the nostalgic nature of an anniversary. Through these services, the branding of an organization may manifest itself through the communication present during the services – through both what is communicated and how those things are communicated.

2. STUDY AND FRAMEWORK

The Study

This study will examine Willow Creek Community Church of South Barrington, Illinois through its 36th - 40th anniversary services which were held from 2011 to 2015. In order to study these services, the author combined in-person viewings of 2015 anniversary services with online viewings of 2011-2014 anniversary services. The recorded videos were available through Willow Creek Community Church's online video archive found at www.willowcreek.tv. For each viewing (whether in-person or online), the author recorded thorough notes describing the content of the services. When designing this study, various methods of data collection were considered. One option involved the inclusion of more personal data collection that would include interviews with various leaders at Willow Creek Community Church who could inform some of the branding decisions that had been made at recent anniversary services. These interviews were intentionally not pursued, primarily because the author wished to remain as neutral as possible in expectation and interpretation of the data. Had these interviews taken place, the data gathered from the actual anniversary services could easily have been tainted, informed more by the spoken intention of leadership than by the visible results of successful or unsuccessful communication. In light of this, analysis found in this study focuses solely on the acts of communication observed through viewing each anniversary service.

An analysis of Willow Creek's five most recent anniversary celebrations should provide an overview of the church's particular branding, as employed to cultivate a unified community within Christianity as well as without. For the years 2011-2014 the anniversary sermons took place during one standard weekend service per year, held at the church campus in South Barrington, Illinois. For the 40th anniversary which was held in 2015 the celebration included six services broadcast by the church, each of which focused on the celebration of the church's 40th anniversary. The first five of these services are part of a weekly sermon-series called *Soundtrack: The Songs and Stories that Shape Us*. This series focuses on the history of Willow Creek Community Church by decade and the series leads to the final service dedicated to the 40th anniversary: a larger celebration that occurred on October 18, 2015 at the United Center in Chicago, Illinois. This study will examine these megachurch anniversary services as examples of intentional audience-appeal and community-building.

While extensive work has been done on branding within for-profit organizations, the church remains a fairly untapped resource for the study of organizational branding. While this may historically be because churches had not attempted much intentional branding, it is now becoming more common for churches to position themselves in relation to their communities and other churches in their vicinities. As such, it is a reality that warrants attention. Certain books do address various aspects of these churches' branding schemes; books like *The Purpose Driven Church* (Warren, 1995) and *Beyond Megachurch Myths* (Thumma, Travis, & Dallas, 2007) speak on the aims of the megachurch. However, much about their chosen branding styles is not included. In addition, book resources such as those are frequently from more biased, involved sources, often originating inside megachurches themselves. While this does not automatically

discount each as a resource, it does significantly limit their usefulness as a more unbiased, academic source. The author of this study has previously attended various Protestant churches and therefore has specific foreknowledge and preconceptions of Christianity that may have informed interpretations of gathered data. However, she is not a member nor a regular attender of Willow Creek Community Church and therefore the study minimizes interpretations that could be influenced by natural affinity or aversion to the specific church and its communicated messages.

Other available resources on religious branding speak of selling religious offerings in general, spanning not only churches but a variety of religious products (Cooke, 2012; Einstein, 2011; 2008; Giggie & Winston, 2002; Lytle, 2010), and there remain only a handful of academic studies into specific, individual churches (Abreu, 2006; Jenkins, 2015; Mulyanegara, 2011; Mulyanegara, Tsarenko, & Mavondo, 2011). This study aims to stand in the gap by providing a detailed case study into some of the communication decisions made by a large megachurch that has seen record growth in its 40-year history, thus adding to the current body of work on church branding.

Additionally, this study looks to contribute to the available research on the anniversary service. In an attempt to glimpse a snapshot of the church's intentionally fostered identity, anniversary services should be a useful tool. Since anniversaries are often used to remind people of the past while building excitement for the future, all within the construct of a particular community, the church anniversary service provides a succinct snapshot of the intentional identity fostered by church leadership. Due to its representative and annual nature, the anniversary service is a resource for meaningful, consistent research on branding choices and,

eventually, branding choice changes as an organization evolves throughout the years. However, the anniversary service has remained an untapped resource for communication inquiry. While branding has been studied in many shapes and forms and across various organizational lines, the intentional nature of branding that is included during anniversary services remains relatively uninvestigated. This study provides a detailed example of the communication present in the anniversary services that took place at Willow Creek Community Church from the years 2011 to 2015. In all, this included ten individual church services each devoted to recognizing the efforts of the organization and the study contributes to the body of work presently available on the anniversary service.

Communication as Culture

As mentioned in chapter one, this paper's research questions are as follows:

1. How does Willow Creek Community Church use its anniversary services to brand itself as a church that identifies with and separates itself from secular culture?

2. How does Willow Creek Community Church use its anniversary services to brand itself as a church that identifies with and separates itself from Christianity in general?

Willow Creek's chosen identity and brand will affect the answer to each of these questions. The first addresses the more external factors aimed at secular society while the second focuses on more internal cultivation of congregants who follow the Christian faith. In order to analyze the communication proffered during Willow Creek's anniversary services, this paper will employ a foundation in James Carey's concept of communication as culture-building ritual.

In his book *Communication as Culture*, James Carey (1989) describes two opposing viewpoints on the topic of communication. The dominant view in scholarship is what he terms the transmission view. In this understanding communication is viewed through its mediums and the technology itself is examined as a vehicle for spreading knowledge and ideas. Here we interpret communication *as* technology and the science of it is at the heart of its study. Often what is meant by the phrase "to study communication" is to study the actual technology that carries messages from one person and/or place to another. This approach to studying communication, be it for internet media, television media, print media or other forms, relies on this depiction of transportation. As Carey (1989) puts it, "communication [is] viewed as a process and a technology that…spread[s], transmit[s], and disseminate[s] knowledge, ideas, and information farther and faster with the goal of controlling space and people" (p. 17). It is this perspective that lends itself to the consideration of communication effects and media influence, always seeking to analyze technology itself as a source for potential moral improvement (Carey, 1989; Huesca, 2003; Wasser, 2006). This view concerns itself with the more scientific nature of American study that began developing during the Age of Enlightenment (Carey, 1989).

Alternatively, Carey (1989) asserts that communication can be viewed as culture. In this perspective communication is partnered with concepts like "sharing," "commonness," and "community" (p. 18) which speak to the root of the word communication. In this way, communication aligns itself not as much with the actual transaction of information, but with the sharing of beliefs. It is a concept that hinges on a sort of "sacred ceremony" that pulls people together in fellowship (Carey, 1989, p. 18) and aims for the "construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action"

(Carey, 1989, pp. 18-19). As summarized by Gretchen Soderlund (2006), the communication of language and symbols serves "to create, maintain, and even overturn the social worlds in which we live. Symbols carry meanings that have the potential to draw us together or pull us apart" (p. 101) and create or continue social life (p. 104). Eric Rothenbuhler (2006) further describes the concept of communication as ritual by noting how various aspects of communication contribute to the building of individual and communal identities, and can construct realities. From structured ceremonies to the everyday communicative acts that are dictated by propriety, communication fashions the world in which individuals live. The ritual view of communication also views communication as community fashioned in time. Per James Carey (1989), ritual communication is "directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time" (p. 18). Through this lens, communication is not seen as a message to be sent across distances, effectively minimizing the space between two geographically distant locations. Rather, ritual communication pulls together groups of people at a particular time as it aims to construct and maintain intentional communities (Carey, 1989).

This communication as ritual perspective is an important pushback to the individualism and pragmatic nature of western society. Whereas a transmission view of newspaper reading will view the act as a dissemination and collection of facts and knowledge, the ritual view acknowledges that what is given and received through the newspaper is actually a portrayal of a particular viewpoint, one that "draws our attention to the social consequences of communication" (Rothenbuhler, 2006, p. 14). Carey (1989) defines it not as "pure information" but as "a portrayal of the contending forces in the world" (p. 20). He explains that while information may be acquired, that is not the focus of communication when viewed as from this

ritualistic and culture-building model. Instead, the emphasis of the communication is placed on

the presentation of reality that "gives life an overall form, order, and tone" (Carey, 1989, p. 21).

Carey's concept complements a framework that aims to study communication as a tool

for creating a model order (Rothenbuhler, 2001). Rothenbuhler (2001) points out that the view

of communication as community is usually based on the ideal. As Couldry (2006) explains, it is

tied to the functionalist viewpoint that assumes that there is such a thing as a functional whole –

a working system that identifies every action as an important byproduct of this ideal whole. This

assumption presents a picture of communication that is an outpouring of an already established

culture. As Rothenbuhler (2001) further addresses, the term community is often focused on

positive connotations of happiness and a peaceful, shared reality. However, as is well-known by

anyone who takes part in a community, communities are often not ideal. The realities of

community are a constant give and take of opinions, ideas, and intentions that may or may not be

received well among others of the group. In light of this, Rothenbuhler (2001) offers an

alternative model of communication that positions community as an accomplishment of

communication. Rather than considering communication as a natural (and ultimately positive)

outpouring of an existing ideal community, he posits that a group's exchange of communication

has the intention of building community toward an ideal goal. As Couldry (2003; 2004; 2006)

explains, the suggestion is to study communication as practice. To put it another way,

communication can either be viewed 1) as the result of an already established (and ideal)

community that produces communicative demonstrations of how individuals accept, appreciate,

and embrace that community or 2) communication can be viewed as a tool that attempts to build

an ideal community that does not, as of yet, exist. Rothenbuhler (2001) asserts that the latter is

the more realistic research model. It "requires recognition that the actualities of communities vary from their ideals and that communication is often about those differences" (p. 160). Instead of mere transaction of thought, communication can (and arguably should) be studied as action toward a particular community ideal. Communication consists of interactions that have the ability to mold and create the world and its interpretations (Carey, 1989, p. 84) through dialogue. Together, these concepts of community-building communication and church branding go hand-in-hand.

This paper has discussed the role of branding in a Christian church and, also, how enacted communication is intended to create a certain type of community. However, an additional item that needs clarification is what type of community the communicating church is aspiring to. For this, the paper will now turn to Stanley Hauerwas and his writing on the community of character (Hauerwas, 1981). Hauerwas will be merged with Quentin Schultze's (2010) allusions to the purpose of communication in faith communities. Kenneth Burke's understanding of identification (Burke, 1969/1962) will complement these positions.

Community

While chapter one asserted that a religion such as Christianity can be marketed similarly to any secular good or service (Einstein, 2008, Twitchell, 2004a), there are also certain differences that become apparent when the purpose of Christian churches grounded in biblical tenets is examined. One large difference is the existence of a community that develops due to a brand. Many commodified products result in what certain individuals call *brand communities*.

A reasonable first assumption is that a brand community for Nike products would be similar to a brand community for the church down the street. If they are able to be marketed and branded similarly, then the resulting communities should be similar. Linda Steiner (2010) contradicts this assumption by pointing out that corporate brand *communities* lack "commitment to mutual aid, to respectful communication, to mutual learning, and to respect for difference" (p. 60). According to Steiner (2010), commodified communities may share history and culture and even a particular identity. However, they do not include an experience of interdependence or reciprocity, nor any sort of "integration through supportive institutions and practices" (p. 60). Therefore, she claims that while commodified branding may result in something labeled as community, those communities do not actually function as authentic communities.

On the other hand, a typical Christian church is not often positioned as merely a good or service to be delivered to any who want it; instead it also functions as a communal offering. This differentiates church branding from the marketing of a particular dish soap or the latest Toyota model. While churches may offer particular goods that are intended to meet the needs of particular populations (families, single parents, divorced individuals, low-income individuals, disabled), more often than not the churches also aspire to be more than an organization offering goods and services to the public. This paper relies on the assertion that Christian churches attempt in their branding to create and market a *community* of believers centered on what they believe to be absolute truth. In such a scenario, rather than the focus being solely on what the church provides or what the church can do, its branding more often centers on what the church *is* and then how that church identity may directly provide for its congregation. To put it another way, the church relies on its community identity to promote its services.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas contends that the question "crucial to the church is what kind of community the church must be to be faithful to the narratives central to Christian convictions" (Hauerwas, 1981, p. 2). It is into this assertion that this paper's ensuing analysis will be entered. The foundation of this paper's focus is that the Christian Church community is intended to be more than a membership club, more than a revenue-generating organization. It is, instead, intended to be a community defined by its development of a particular kind of people (Hauerwas, 1981, p. 2). This necessary community is in direct contrast with the failed communities that Hauerwas sees as the norm of society. Quentin J. Schultze (2010) expounds on this deficiency when, in his depiction of a faith-interpretation of "contemporary understandings of humans' defective intersubjectivity" (p. 45), he summarizes the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis. He defines their fall as a fall from community and communication. He asserts that by choosing sin instead of community with God, they made themselves the center of meaning and, thus, "Adam and Eve reduced their capacity to know perfectly, to be fully virtuous, and to act responsibly for the good of each other" (p. 45). In essence, their choice to esteem themselves through the action of their original sin resulted in the loss of perfect community and they are left with needing to "relearn communication for the purpose of renewing relationships" (p. 45). Schultze (2010) defines this lost community (that people must strive to attain once again) as an "ontological orientation toward life evident in the specific beliefs, practices, and institutions that human beings believe will help them to rebind their broken relationships among God, people, the physical world, and their individual selves" (p. 45). He roots this concept in the collective harmony of the Jewish concept of shalom, which defines "religious practice as social action…not just as the individual pursuit of happiness" (p. 46). Schultze (2010) defines this framework as

biblical realism, which speaks caution to those who would seek individual gain rather than gain for shared and communal interests. To further define the community that this paper will allude to, Stanley Hauerwas (1981) asserts the general intention of Christianity as striving to be a community "capable of forming virtuous people" who are "not characterized by an oppressive uniformity" but can be "partly seen in how it enables the diversity of gifts and virtues to flourish" (p. 3). Essentially, Hauerwas (1981) contends that the ideal Christian Church is not out to sell a concept of morality, not out to become the most appealing form of religion, and not out for the sole purpose of improving general society. Rather, the mission of the church is to bring individuals together for corporate edification, for the general goodwill and shared community that Schultze (2010) also references.

Tying directly to chapter one's discussion of the influence of story in the world of branding, Hauerwas (1981) goes on to espouse the church's need for the implementation of story to encourage church community to "serve the world on their own terms" (p. 10). He also points to the church's need to cultivate a community that encourages members to "trust and depend on one another" (Hauerwas, 1981, p. 11). These right-minded communities, Hauerwas contends, require narrative. They require stories that serve to enlighten communities to the truth of the world and "fight the constant temptation to self-deception" (1981, p. 18).

Church branding, then (as defined in this paper), exists to neither sell God nor the church. Rather, it intends to foster an intentional community of Christians, no matter how diverse each individual's own experiences or lifestyle may be. Lana Rakow (2010) connects this aspect of communication with identity, explaining that the answer to the question "Who are we?" relies on "finding commonality across broad cultural groups in the experience and practice of ritual and

symbol" (p. 135). Successful church communities bring together diverse populations that embrace differences while also choosing to identify together. Kenneth Burke's work on identification is helpful here, as he notes that identification requires both a joining and a disjoining of two bodies. Take, for instance, Burke's example of A and B. If A is to identify with B, in that similar identification they become "substantially one" (Burke, 1969/1962, p. 21). However, both A and B still remain essentially unique. They are joined together in one aspect, but remain distinct in others. Burke's concept of *consubstantiality* defines individuals as being both "joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another" (1969/1962, p. 21). The concept of identification relies on the reality of two beings as naturally disjointed and separate. Without those differences, there would be no need for identification.

Albert & Whetton (1985) apply this same concept of identification to the organizational sphere. They argue that discovering an organization's identity (which directly correlates to this paper's definition of the term brand) requires that the identity (or brand) of an organization must distinguish the organization from others and add to its distinctiveness (p. 265). Not only are individuals diverse, but individual church congregations are diverse. Earlier in chapter one, the Christian church was postured as a global, unified group that was also comprised of smaller groups with significant distinctions. Denominations and churches, then, fit well in the discussion of identification and distinction. It is this reality of identification and distinction that paves the way for this paper's discussion of the particular church branding choices of Willow Creek Community Church. As individual Christian churches (like Willow Creek) are both similar to and distinct from each other in how they aspire to Hauerwas's idea of a virtue-building community, the branding communicated by them should be done with the intention of fostering

identification. Community-building relies on bringing individuals together through some measure of identification. Building a more ideal and effective community group must encourage distinct personalities to step outside their distinctness in order to find and embrace aspects of identification. And it is the purpose of church branding to build this more ideal community through communication.

3. BRANDING FOR A NON-CHRISTIAN AUDIENCE

Introduction

Thus far, this paper has taken a look at the concept of branding and how that branding can relate to religion and, more specifically, a Protestant megachurch. In the ensuing analysis, the paper will explore how the communication employed in Willow Creek's recent anniversary services serves to brand Willow Creek as it aims to build a desirable community. As mentioned earlier, branding caters to two categories of people: those the organization wants to draw in to the fold, and those already in the fold. Branding aims for breadth of audience, but also depth. This chapter will look at the first concept, breadth, which addresses the paper's first research question:

1. How does Willow Creek Community Church use its anniversary services to brand itself as a church that identifies with and separates itself from secular culture?

The chapter will take a look at how the services being examined (the 36th through the 40th anniversaries) communicate in a way that may encourage non-members to attend one or more services. In doing so, it will analyze communication as a process through which a certain type of community is fashioned.

Concepts of identity play an integral role in attracting individuals to an organization through branding. As summarized earlier, the ability to identify with someone or something is

two-fold and relies both on similarity and difference. First, an individual must identify with another. There must be some commonality that draws the two together. However, this commonality relies entirely on the fact that there is some disparity. Without disparity, unity and identification would be the constant state of affairs and, thus, require no recognition (Burke, 1969/1962). Disparity is typically the starting point for a Christian church when it compares itself to secular culture. However, Willow Creek's anniversary services work to minimize this disparity. This chapter will break into two main categories of analysis: narrative content and aesthetic content.

<p style="text-align:center">Sermon/Narrative Content</p>

A common and integral part of the average Protestant church service is the sermon. Known elsewhere as the lesson or homily, each week a minister stands in front of a congregation and speaks. He or she speaks to inform, teach, and guide, and may even speak to entertain. Willow Creek Community Church's anniversary services are no different. At each of the analyzed services the Senior Pastor, Bill Hybels, communicated a message to the Willow Creek congregants. Always dressed in business casual attire, Hybels' approach to the audience was one of ease and comfortability. His messages frequently referenced and appealed to secular news and interests while also maintaining separation from secularism through distinctly Christian messages. In this way, these messages were designed to help non-members identify with the church while, at the same time, reminding them that the church is still intended to be separate and different from the secular world in which they live. While a transmission view of

communication may analyze the messages present in these sermons, ritual communication

analyzes them differently since, as Carey (1989) asserted, it "downplays the role of the sermon,

the instruction and admonition" (p. 18). Instead of analyzing sermon content for its edicts or

lessons, the spoken words will be studied in how they approach and relate to church attendees,

and how they encourage attendees to approach and relate to each other in a fostered community.

<u>Common Cultural and Historical References</u>

One prevalent aspect of Willow Creek's anniversary services is their intentionality in

aligning the church culturally. This was initiated during the *Soundtrack* services by relating the

beginnings of Willow Creek Community Church. A photo displayed during a video included in

the 1970s *Soundtrack* service was a shot of the first meeting place of Willow Creek Community

Church. This was the Willow Creek Theatre in Palatine, Illinois which served as a neutral

ground for welcoming those who might shy away from more obviously sacred spaces. In fact,

one of the displayed photos of this first meeting place included the marquee proclaiming the

theatre was then showing Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, which lent an air of cultural relevance to

the church that would not have been, had they been congregating in a church at that time. In

addition, certain messages spoken by Bill Hybels during the anniversary services included timely

news stories that would provide analogies for the more Christian messages he would be speaking

of. In one example, during the 38th anniversary service Hybels spoke of Mylène Paquette, a

woman attempting to individually row a boat across the entire North Atlantic Ocean from west to

east. Hybels referenced Paquette's journey which, nearly three months into her voyage,

experienced a huge setback when a storm capsized her boat and caused her to lose some essential

equipment. Receiving a signal for help from Paquette a large ocean-liner, the Queen Mary 2,

altered its course in order to meet Paquette and provide her with replacements for her lost

satellite phone and anchors, as well as a care package that included extra provisions (CBC News,

2013). The story was interesting, timely, and culturally relevant as Paquette's journey was

taking place at the time. In this way, the story had a secular focus. It was something anyone in

the audience may have already heard of. Hybels's message did not rely solely on the Bible for

its text, but dived into a story that had nothing innately to do with either faith or Christianity. It

was a story about a woman attempting an impressive feat that could be of interest to any person,

Christian or not. This sort of decision helps non-members identify with the Christian church.

After sharing this story, however, Hybels went on further to use this contemporary news piece as

a metaphor for the Christian life. Like the Queen Mary 2, Hybels taught his audience that God is

quick to answer in our moments of distress with provisions that seem supernatural. Like the

ocean liner that just happened to be near enough to be of significant help to Paquette, Hybels

spoke of ways that God had provided in perfect ways for Willow Creek throughout the years.

Everyday provisions and once-in-a-lifetime provisions were touted as being given by the

gracious hand of God. This message appeared spoken not as a history or knowledge lesson, but

rather seemed to encourage a type of community that relied on God for their provisions, trusting

the He would provide in a unique and sufficient way.

  Similarly, the 40th anniversary *Soundtrack* services also included references to

contemporary culture which were used to help audiences identify with the church. These

services were organized decade by decade. As such, the focus of each message was the church's

history during that decade. At the beginning of each decade-themed *Soundtrack* message, Bill

Hybels opted to highlight four or five main events or topics from the decade that alluded to the

culture of the time. These events were not related directly to Willow Creek Community Church,

but served a larger audience by recounting events from American history that took place during

the spotlighted decade. He then used these things to posture Willow Creek *within* society during

those decades. For instance, during the 1970s service Hybels chose items that portrayed the

skeptical darkness and distrust that allegedly embodied the decade of Willow Creek's inception.

He was direct with his audience, verbalizing how his intention was to describe how Willow

Creek Community Church aimed to (and he claimed did) meet needs during a difficult decade.

But to do this, he spread a message that a larger audience could understand. He employed

photos of the Napalm Girl, Richard Nixon, the Jonestown Massacre and a graph delineating the

decade's economic recession. Each was intended to represent what he claims was the cynicism

of 1970s American culture.

Hybels chose an economic chart to remind or inform audiences of the large scale

recession that had a hold on Americans during the 1970s. Inflation, high unemployment, and an

oil crisis were used as examples of current events that had left many Americans feeling as if

circumstances were outside of their control. Hybels aligned this feeling with the realities of the

Vietnam War, as represented by the iconic photo of the Napalm Girl. This photo displayed a

young girl screaming and running away from a napalm strike. The poignancy of the photo is

amplified by her naked body; naked because she had had to rip her burning clothes off her body

to save herself. Using this photo, Hybels reminded his audience of the great anti-war sentiment

of the decade. He then alluded (once again) to the lack of control many Americans felt at the

time.

Additionally, Hybels typified the 1970s by describing a general distrust for governmental and religious authorities. A photo of Richard Nixon served to remind American audiences (Christian or otherwise) of the distrust in American government that was furthered by the Watergate Scandal- the scandal that eventually led to President Nixon's resignation. To this was added a photograph of the devastation after the Jonestown Massacre. Through this photo, audiences viewed hundreds of deceased victims, killed either by force or by willing suicide due to the influence of a religious cult led by Jim Jones. Hybels claimed that while the 1970s were a decade defined by distrust of the government, there was also no little amount of distrust over religion. The Jonestown massacre was a shocking reminder of the harm that religion and religious fanatics could do.

Hybels used such photos to point out Willow Creek's attention to its surrounding world and culture. Instead of placing the church in its own realm or atmosphere, he pointed out the world's perceived need for a cultural infusion of "life, hope and love" and a "jolt of joy" in a decade otherwise overwhelmed by the mire of a fallen world. Here we see Hybels intentionally using cultural references to help his audience identify with each other, whether they were an active part of Willow Creek or not. But then he follows with a connection to Willow Creek specifically, intentionally moving from a history that every member of his audience could share – to a portion of small history (Willow Creek's) that far fewer could relate to and identify with. In this, he identified Willow Creek as a church part of standard American history – but also separate in its alleged ability to serve a society affected by scandals and horrors of the times. Here an encouraged identification is seen, though the church continued to separate itself in some

ways. Culture was referenced to build commonality with the audience, but Willow Creek's response was postured as unique due to its role as a church. In addition, Willow Creek did not appear to be educating its audience through the sharing of historical facts. In fact, few facts were related. In this, there seemed to be a ritual form of communication that relied not on the sharing of information, but on a cultivating of audience perception. Historical facts were related not as facts, but as a backdrop for a way to see the world and the culture of the time, of each particular decade.

Each of the *Soundtrack* services attempted to identify with audiences in a similar manner to the first. The selections for the remaining decades painted the backdrops for the culture in which Willow Creek resided as the church began to thrive. One Hybels sermon claimed Ronald Reagan brought hope with his "eternal optimism" of the 1980s, which was bolstered by the Inauguration Day freeing of American hostages held in Iran. The eventual destruction of the Berlin Wall further realized this sense of hope. He claimed that young urban professionals (Yuppies) personified the upswing in the American economy during the 80s. He also mentioned Chicago Bear Hall of Fame linebacker and Super Bowl champion, Mike Singletary. Appealing to the Chicago church's cultural history, Singletary was mentioned as a celebrity who also attended Willow Creek and served in the children's ministry. When describing the 1990s, Hybels painted a picture of a decade that saw profound difficulties in global and race relations, as exemplified by the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles and the Rwandan mass genocide. When discussing the 2000s, Hybels referenced the significant economic recession and the 9/11 World Trade Center tragedy – points of identification that anyone in the audience could relate to. The war in Iraq and Afghanistan was also mentioned, with Hybels stopping his message to ask

the congregation to stand to honor those who fought in those locations. With this action, he positioned Willow Creek as an organization that esteems veterans and upholds them with respect and honor.

Each of these topics and actions served to stand in as a way to relate audiences to each other and to the church, thus attempting to build a community fashioned in time (Carey, 1989). They served as unification through shared history. That shared history was then used to launch audiences into an appreciation for Willow Creek's response to or role in some of those particular circumstances. In a notable example that took place during the 40th anniversary celebration held at the United Center, one of the items that Willow Creek brought to the attention of its audience was the church's focus on global matters. Willow Creek mentioned that this focus began with a deep concern for the AIDS pandemic. Relying on audience memories of the fear and anxiety prompted by the outbreak of AIDS, Willow Creek positioned itself as a servant of the world, pouring out aid to affected communities, regardless of their faith affiliation. Willow Creek's role was positioned as particularly notable, as the AIDS crisis had been widely scorned by conservative Christianity due to its supposed connection to the homosexual lifestyle. These cultural concerns and references posture Willow Creek as a church that identifies with, is influenced by, and participates in the culture and events of the world, once again painting a picture of a particular type or community – and using language to foster and reinforce those community ideals. These examples also provide a natural connection to the next topic that analyzes how Willow Creek Community Church engaged in actions that could be universally applauded. These actions worked to serve an audience much larger than one Christian congregation.

Universal Messages

One particularly intentional branding choice employed by Willow Creek during its anniversary services was the inclusion of universal humanitarian appeals, which encouraged a type of universal community. These portions of the messages presented common ideals to audiences, appealing both within the body of Christians but also to those who may not overtly identify with Christianity. During the 36th anniversary service, Bill Hybels spoke of the term community. Rather than discussing community as being particularly Christian, he defined it as "making a commitment to a small band of brothers and sisters and telling them what's really going on in your life. Disclosing stuff that isn't going well and making commitments to one another that you're going to walk with each other through whatever life throws at you." Definitionally, this concept of community was one that could be accepted by almost any member of the audience, religious or not. As such, Hybels framed the community offered by Willow Creek as something that anyone in the audience might find appealing. Once again, communication did not focus as much on imparting facts and information as it did on cultivating a sense of camaraderie between attendees.

In its attempt to attract believers and unbelievers alike, much was made of Willow Creek's acts of service that could be considered admirable both inside and outside of Christian church culture, allowing for a wider breadth of audience. Ministries like Special Friends were highlighted as ways to serve and value frequently marginalized individuals such as the mentally, emotionally, and physically disabled. Details were provided in order to inform audiences about Willow Creek's work with these groups. This intentionally led audiences toward a respect for

the esteem given to these frequently neglected people. Throughout the anniversary services, and especially during the *Soundtrack* services and the United Center celebration, there were also verbalized accounts of generous charity work that was contributed by Willow Creek church members. Many of these instances were described as being initiated beyond the sanction of the church as a whole. According to Hybels, there were individual members who began to serve the marginalized. In one retelling, Hybels described how members began collecting non-perishable food items without encouragement or prompting from the church itself. After collection, the food would be distributed to needy families within the church. Often, car trunks would be filled and then lined up side by side in the church parking lot so that low income families could select items that they needed after each church service. Tying this service to general humanitarian work, the retelling of this story served to inform visitors of the spirit of generosity that is esteemed by those at Willow Creek Community Church. Hybels's account spoke of general kindness that is universally accepted as "good." Food donations given to low-income families is an action that is esteemed both inside and outside of Christianity. Feeding the hungry is an ethical action regardless of race, religion or any other identity. Even more potentially appealing to audiences outside of regular church attenders is that this offering was initiated by individual attenders, rather than mandated by the church leadership. This speaks of Willow Creek as a congregation made up of generous individuals who have been led to give to their community where needed. That giving spirit is one that can be universally admired.

In a similar vein, Hybels spoke of a time when he would look out to the parking lot and find a row of vehicles lining the back. As it turned out, church members who had a mechanical knowledge of vehicles were offering free car maintenance to single mothers in the congregation.

Again, this was not a service organized by the church leadership. Rather, it was an assistance

initiated and offered by individual congregants who were focused on how to meet the needs of

others. Hybels mentioned that these and other similar movements began the church's focus on

compassion and justice, eventually leading to the influential Care Center ministry that opened in

2013. This Care Center continues the work of the individual congregants who prompted Willow

Creek to serve those in need. Even more universally applicable is the fact that as it has grown,

the Care Center has been able to serve not only members of the Willow Creek Community

Church, but anyone from the local community regardless of race, religion, or church affiliation.

As Bill Hybels stated in Willow Creek's 38th anniversary service, the aim of the Care Center is

for "people who have a little more" to "love people who have a little less." The anniversary

services' focus on the mission of meeting community needs and infusing those provisions with

hope can be considered a universally accepted idea – one that aims to serve regardless of church

membership or non-membership. Through the sharing of these experiences, Willow Creek

intimated that these actions are highly valued within the church. It related this information not to

teach about Willow Creek Community Church's history, but to encourage members to continue

in the type of community that initiates such acts of service. It appeared to foster communal

ideals that would result in a more unified church community.

During the 1980s *Soundtrack* service, Bill Hybels mentioned seven items that defined the

intentional purpose of Willow Creek Community Church at its inception. He listed these items,

noting that they have not changed and are still a central focus of the leadership at Willow. While

the first six of these items will be introduced later in chapter four, the seventh warrants

mentioning in this chapter. Among Willow Creek's declared foci is an item that proclaims that

Willow Creek Community Church aims to teach people how to be good money managers in order to help them find financial freedom. This coincides with one of the reasons that the Hybelses felt led to begin a new church: they were tired of churches always asking for money. This aim that centers on money management does the inverse by pledging to aid Willow Creek attenders in learning to handle their funds more wisely. One way Bill Hybels spoke of doing this was by partnering with Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University. In this financially focused curriculum, budgeting, debt consolidation, investing and a number of other topics are presented to audiences without a potentially distracting spiritual focus. As Willow Creek claims, the focus is on individuals getting control of their money. As such, it is a topic that many in the congregation, regardless of faith background, could find worthwhile and beneficial. It was also one that hinted as the church's desire for individuals to grow in their finances toward greater comfort and peace – once again reinforcing the aspiration of building a stronger community.

Hybels's messages also alluded to how Willow Creek's ministry of compassion and justice aims to serve the needy throughout the world, be they sick, hungry, poor, or imprisoned in some fashion. One point particularly emphasized was that rather than taking the American Willow Creek Church to all the places they thought the church could help, they instead focused on securing partnerships with service organizations and churches in the areas of need. Rather than spreading Americanism (or Christian Americanism) globally, they claim to strive for cultural sensitivity by providing support through multi-cultural partnerships. In each of these things Willow Creek intentionally postured itself alongside universal ideals that would be considered commendable by a wide variety of audience members.

Arts and Entertainment

Another example of aiming to identify in a culturally broad manner is through Willow Creek's choices in how they use and present art and entertainment. In one example, during the 39th anniversary service the opening songs led off with a number of musicians playing horned instruments. Located throughout the auditorium, both on and off the stage, individual players were spotlighted with solos during the musical introduction. This music and positioning of the musicians was creative and interesting. It placed art at the forefront of the service by using it as an introduction to the service that would follow. Music was also esteemed during the first service of the *Soundtrack* series, which covered church history during the 1970s. A video aired that was comprised of interviews from founding members of the church who began discussing the church's inception during the 1970s. Initial clips presented founding members of Willow Creek professing affinity for the secular music of the time including Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Simon and Garfunkel, as well as a voiced desire to have been at Woodstock. Commentators made comments such as "in the early days there was only secular music and…really crappy Christian music" and "Willow wanted to use music that would connect with the audience of the day" testifying to the church's belief in using a more contemporized entertainment from its inception. Through comments like these, Willow Creek chose to estrange itself from Christian churches that had viewed these secular bands as sinful. Instead, Willow Creek portrayed a Christianity that acknowledged secular culture as an acceptable (and even desirable) part of life. Even the dated 1970s clips of Willow Creek's church services from the videos shown on screen showcased a churched musical style that was a significant departure

from typical church services of the decade. As mentioned and displayed at the United Center

celebration, Willow Creek aims to include art forms as a form of teaching and worship. Be they

skits, dance interpretations, short films, abstract art, or more contemporary musical styles, the

inclusion of art is often at the center of Willow Creek. Certain *Soundtrack* services showcased

varied offerings, many of which were theatrical or videoed forms that aimed to employ art styles

in order to relate teaching. One skit in particular relied on humorous general depictions of a

married couple. Judging by the level of the audience's laughter, they found it appealing and,

quite likely, identifiable. This identity, then, turned into a tool through which Willow Creek

spoke a more spiritual message to its audience: a message about the esteem that should be given

to partners within a marriage relationship. Identification was used to then turn to the difference

between the stereotype of an actual marriage and what a marriage should aspire to be. It

intended to use a relatable art form to encourage and challenge its audience to consider a new

way of thinking. This drama message was not a "how to" of improving one's marriage. Rather,

through a sharing of commonness (Carey, 1989), it encouraged attendees to improve the

community present in their marriages and, thus, increase the unified community of the church as

a whole. It aimed to cultivate a more ideal community (Rothenbuhler, 2001) by encouraging

individuals to improve their relations with each other.

The title of the anniversary series, *Soundtrack: The Songs and Stories that Shape Us*, also

directs the audience toward Willow Creek's esteem for music. To center an entire anniversary

sermon series around the broad concept of music (specifically a soundtrack) makes a strong

statement highlighting contemporary music's place in the history of the church. This is

especially important considering the historic focus of purely religious music being involved in

church worship, to the exclusion of other musical forms. The advertising for the sermon series set its audience up to expect culturally influential and entertaining music – music that could be identified by the general populace, not just current members of the church. Since Willow Creek Community Church launched in 1975, the first service in the *Soundtrack* sermon series focused on the 70s as a decade. After several worship songs and a short video of interviews was shown, a medley of popular songs from the 1970s began. Songs such as "Joy to the World" and "Disco Inferno" led off the medley, with the vocalists striving for campy faithfulness in their renditions. Dichotomously adding both authenticity and laugh-inspiring entertainment value were the costumes that the vocalists and instrumentalists wore on stage, one of which included a ruffled shirt with a powder blue tuxedo jacket. "We are Family" and "I Will Survive" continued the set until "You're the One that I Want" from the musical *Grease* and "Play That Funky Music White Boy" ended the medley. All extremely popular and identifiable songs, the performance received a standing ovation from the audience. The entire experience was more reminiscent of a show on the Strip than a traditional church service, lending an air of the contemporary to the church service.

This performance theme was echoed during the following weekends, as services covered performances of songs from the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, all of which were popular, identifiable, and enthusiastically performed. Songs such as "Power of Love," "Walk Like an Egyptian," and "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" portrayed the 1980s, and each was sung and danced with the campy feel of the earlier 1970s service. Performances of "Who Let the Dogs Out" and "Life is a Highway" were showcased during the later decade services. Worship leader, Matt Lundgren, dressed in a baggy pair of metallic silver Hammer/Harem pants as he danced and

sang to M.C. Hammer's "U Can't Touch This." Country music received a nod with Billy Ray Cyrus's "Achy Breaky Heart" which was sung with country twang, country attire, and country line dancing highlighted upstage. The theme song from the popular 1990s television show *Friends* was performed and the apex of the 1990s musical tribute included a rendition of "My Heart Will Go On" from the blockbuster hit *Titanic*. This performance was accompanied by a humorous imitation of the scene between actors Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio that takes place on the bow of the ship, using a portion of a ship that had been erected stage left. In the background, footage from the actual movie scene played on a large screen. Through these Soundtrack performances, Willow Creek appeared to be using ritual actions (such as songs) to reinforce the community ideals of contemporary worship styles and entertaining services that would welcome many potential congregants – even those previously unchurched.

In addition, each weekend of the *Soundtrack* series was intended to build anticipation for the larger 40th anniversary celebration which would be held at the United Center in Chicago, Illinois. This venue is another sign that Willow Creek Community Church is open to contemporized entertainment. Rather than insisting that an anniversary service be held in an actual church building, Willow Creek rented an entertainment venue most known for being home to major league sports teams and a popular site for other large-scale entertainment shows. This anniversary service began powerfully with a tribute to a contemporized and artistic version of "church." The service opened with a video displayed on the large screens hanging in the center of the United Center. This video was an artistic prose – a brief and poetic retelling of the Biblical story of humanity. This video used cameras' creative storytelling to inspire audiences through artistic pictures that could appeal to all audiences. Using only one performer but many

different scenes, camera shots, and lighting styles, the video montage spoke its story through colors, rhythmic lyrics and insightful vocal interpretations. In another nod to contemporary music, the United Center celebration highlighted a rendition of U2's "With or Without You" performed by a female vocalist and accompanied by various instrumentalists. Sounds combined to create a unique version of a song that would likely be familiar even to unchurched members of the audience.

Later in the same service, a focus on Willow Creek's racial inclusion and reconciliation was mentioned and another video was used to introduce the subject. This video, instead of using prose, was entirely without words and relied solely on interpretive dance to speak its message. It displayed four individuals, each of a different race. These individuals performed their own dances in different locations throughout Chicago, eventually moving toward a joint meeting place where they all came together in love (portrayed by choreographed hugs), before setting out again, leaving in separate directions. This video used a high art form to portray the honoring of racial differences, the edifying meeting of those racially diverse individuals, and the importance of maintaining the uniqueness that each person can offer. This type of reconciliation was visually removed from anything spiritual or religious, thus aiming to attract and speak to a wide audience that included those not necessarily affiliated with church culture. It also alluded to a type of community that Willow Creek aims to foster: a place where people of all races can come together and be accepted as equals.

In another example, the church's 2014 anniversary celebration began with a video that spoke of the joy of the treasure box at the end of a child's doctor's visit. It spoke of the joy of these gifts despite the fact that, years later, those very gifts would hold little or no appeal.

Appealing to a memory that most audience members would have, this video introduced a topic to a broad audience base, welcoming all to identify and understand the point. It eventually moved to a more spiritual message, explaining that every gift, no matter what it is, comes from the same source. James 1:17 was quoted as saying, "Every good and perfect gift is from above." In this way, an artistic videoed performance welcomed all individuals to enter into identification with a common memory. However, holding to the need for identification to be paired with disparity, it moved on to a spiritual message that audience members could be moved to comprehend, whether they ascribed to its alleged truth or not.

A complement to the culturally relevant style used during the anniversary services was the use of technology that accompanied each song. Lights were often of a strobed variety and timed with the rhythm of each song's music. The lit background shone on the stage's scrim during the *Soundtrack* services changed with each musical number, lending a variety to the atmosphere that kept church from seeming static and unchanging. The technology employed at the United Center celebration was particularly cutting edge. Moving spotlights peppered the stage and floor. The constructed 360º stage included unique lighting that would change colors for each portion of the service. As music was performed throughout the *Soundtrack* series and the United Center service, lyrics of each praise song were displayed on the bottom of large projector screens to enable any audience member to understand the lyrics and, if they so desired, sing along. The most common thing shown on these screens was live footage of the Willow Creek performers or speakers. In the case of music performers, this footage was not static, nor comprised only of one or two medium shots. Instead, it offered live feeds from many cameras and was varied in its shot selection. Vocalists and instrumentalists were highlighted and

showcased. Long shots from various cameras would display the entire stage, but the prevalent

cutting to different angles lent an edge reminiscent of the footage available on large screens at

secular rock concerts.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

Each of these aspects includes a variety of ways in which Willow Creek aimed to identify

with the secular aspects of culture. Rather than erecting and remaining in a bubble of Christian

culture, Willow Creek went to great lengths throughout its anniversary services to position itself

as a unique part of secular culture. With spoken and enacted appreciation for historical events

and artistic endeavors, Willow Creek's anniversary services offered moments of identification to

a broad range of audiences, while still often reminding people of its unique role as a church. As

such, Willow Creek seemed to walk a line between fully identifying with unbelievers and fully

disassociating with them. Rather, Willow Creek's focus on larger audiences aimed to welcome

them without pressure, while also presenting a picture of themselves as an active, Christian

church. Through these instances of communication, Willow Creek also appeared to nurture

certain community ideals. As Carey (1989) and Rothenbuhler (2001, 2006) posit,

communication can be used as more than the pure transmission of facts. This chapter's analysis

helped show that Willow Creek Community Church used various forms and instances of

communication to encourage the building and growth of community: a community that remains

unified in its approach to others, including those outside of the churched body. Communication

decisions branded Willow Creek as a church with a significant focus outside itself, viewing the

world and people outside its own walls as worthy of great attention. Communicative acts served

to further this communal notion and encouraged service attendees to further the community

toward a more perfect ideal.

4. BRANDING FOR A CHRISTIAN AUDIENCE

Introduction

In this chapter, the same anniversary services will be analyzed for examples of what type of communication was used by Willow Creek Community Church to encourage already consistent audience members, or those who already identify with Christianity, to attend and remain at Willow Creek all the while aiming to build a stronger community. This will relate back to the paper's second research question:

2. How does Willow Creek Community Church use its anniversary services to brand itself as a church that identifies with and separates itself from Christianity in general?

Here the paper will assess examples of identity and disparity, with a particular focus on Willow Creek's desire to identify with Christianity in general while also differentiating itself from other congregations. Much of this chapter will revolve around the idea of Christian community, more specifically the type of Christian community Willow Creek defines and esteems. This concept of Christian community is used to identify Willow Creek as a distinctly Christian church while also separating it as distinct *from* other churches.

Sermon/Narrative Content

Returning to a focus on Bill Hybels's messages during each anniversary service, many of

his words and phrases directly relate to an already-Christian audience. One primary vehicle for

relating these messages is through spoken references to intended church purpose. As far as

branding goes, there's not much that is more obvious than an intended message being spoken

aloud. As a representative of church leadership, Hybels's words can be assumed to speak for the

church leadership as a whole as he relates the planned purposes of Willow Creek and encourages

consistent attendees to participate in the Willow Creek community as it exists in its current time.

Retellings of History

The retelling of the history of Willow Creek Community Church was a very common

theme during most of the anniversary services being analyzed for this study. Most obviously, the

entire *Soundtrack* series was focused on the historical retelling of Willow Creek Community

Church, decade by decade. Changes and developments were highlighted as Bill Hybels spoke of

the church in the cultural contexts throughout the years. Much was also made of Willow Creek's

beginnings as a small high school youth group in Park Ridge, Illinois and how those youths

invested in the church and initiated the growth and passion that have continued throughout the

years. During the 36th anniversary service, Bill Hybels retold their vision in this way:

> There was once a community of people radically devoted to God. This community of
> Christ followers were so radically devoted to one another that they started to call each
> other brothers and sisters and they loved across socioeconomic lines, across racial lines,
> gender lines. They took their meals in each other's homes with gladness and sincerity of
> heart. This remarkable community of believers prayed bold prayers, actually believing
> the transcended God might answer them, and He did and signs and wonders were taking
> place. They worshipped with a kind of freedom and liberality that set the place on fire.
> They were bold in the proclamation of their faith even at the risk of their own life. They
> had so much integrity in that community that people outside the church were curious

about what was going on inside the church and they respected it.

This vision was rooted in the establishment of the first Christian church as recorded in the biblical book of Acts. Bill Hybels spoke of it as the ideal that prompted the beginning of Willow Creek. Hybels related the story of when he was first convicted that Christian community could achieve this same ideal, and how he and others set out to begin a congregation that would hold fast to this vision. He spoke often about the group of high schoolers that boldly invited friends to join the church, of the movie theatre where they first gathered, and of the stories of financial provisions that made the growth of Willow Creek (and its buildings) possible. In each of these retellings, Bill Hybels focused on the mission that Willow Creek and its leadership have aimed to stay true to through its 40-year history. This retelling confirms that concept of fostering community as it aims for a more perfect ideal (Rothenbuhler, 2001).

In addition, the retelling of personal testimonies of faith deeply rooted in Willow Creek were frequently spoken and referenced during the anniversary services. As discussed in chapter three, stories of service acts were highlighted and provided encouragement for audience members. The story of individuals providing food for low-income families and car maintenance for single mothers provided a picture of Willow Creek history that could be applauded and could act as an encouragement for similar future acts. The United Center service also featured a number of "Only God" stories, which highlighted unique and improbable testimonies that the church ascribed as being possible only because of God. Retellings of the creative directors' testimonies fit this theme, as did the testimony of one man who had been serving at Willow Creek's Camp Paradise for nearly 40 years. A camp that serves as a place of retreat for families, its story was retold and served as a way to verbally connect all audience members to its story.

From the mention of the generous land donation of 700+ acres in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, to the retelling of the camp's creation and development and additional testimonies from camp attendees, the retelling of the camp was a comprehensive encouragement. It was portrayed as a place where individuals could engage and connect with each other, away from the many distractions of everyday life. This encouraged the furthering of a community that would come together to welcome these opportunities (donations), and further their uses as a way to encourage the congregation to deepen their bonds with each other. Far more than retelling the facts of the church's history, these stories served to encourage the current congregants of Willow Creek to continue the type of community that has helped define Willow Creek Community Church throughout the years.

<u>Encouraging a Common Mission</u>

In one of the most direct addresses to this church purpose, Bill Hybels spoke of a list of items that comprised the seven-step member-focus of Willow Creek Community Church (of which the final item was addressed in chapter three). In this, Willow Creek encouraged solidarity with its Christian members, encouraging them to enact this list of purposes. The list (minus the aforementioned seventh point) is as follows:

1. If you (attenders) come (to Willow Creek), build relationships with people far from God.
2. Share a verbal witness of your faith in Christ with anyone who will listen.
3. Invite seeking friends to church.
4. If someone becomes a Christian, invite them to Willow Creek's Midweek (Wednesday

night) service, which offers extended worship, more prayer and a verse-by-verse Biblical study.

5. Encourage everyone to belong to a small group.

6. Help each person discover their spiritual gift(s).

In this list, a very intentional Christian message is present. Items one through three further the evangelical mission of Willow Creek Community Church. Item number one begins by mirroring some of the concepts this study analyzed in chapter three's analysis of Willow Creek's focus on the unchurched. As presented in that chapter, Willow Creek's focus was often on welcoming and identifying with people who may not consider themselves Christian nor have what the church considers a relationship with God. The first point in this list agrees with those actions by encouraging members of the faith to step out and "build relationships with people" who are not close to God. In this, Willow Creek affirms a corporate purpose (reaching out) by encouraging individual members to carry out the purpose. Beyond just making friends, however, item number two directs Christian members of the congregation to go a step further and speak openly about their own faith. Rather than remaining silent about their Christianity, they are encouraged to introduce the subject in their own relationships and conversations. This reflects the message that Willow Creek leadership sends through their anniversary services. They identify and interact with cultural references that allow a wide variety of people to relate, all the while still differentiating themselves from certain aspects of secular culture. Item three is a continuation of the first two objectives, encouraging Christian audience members to eventually ask friends to attend Willow Creek services. Particularly important in this item is the use of the word *seeking*. By stipulating that seeking friends should be invited to Willow Creek, the church seems to imply

that an evangelism that is too bold or forward, or that comes at the wrong time, is not preferable.

Rather, the wording seems to imply that non-Christians should be encouraged to attend church in

their own timing, and only when they decide they are ready to attend in order to find further

answers to any questions they may have about God. This inclusion seems to speak of Willow

Creek's desire to be a welcoming church, but not one that would be too aggressive by pursuing

gaining numbers before first considering the spiritual state of its potential visitors.

An extension of the evangelism prescribed in steps one through three is Willow Creek's

showcasing of the regional campuses of Willow Creek Community Church. Hybels spoke of

these as "regional expressions of Willow Creek." As he described, once Willow Creek attested

to this focus, the church started getting larger and people were driving over an hour to attend.

Members began mentioning their hesitancy to invite friends, neighbors, and family to a church

located so far from home. As a result, the concept of regional campuses was introduced. These

campuses are affiliated with Willow Creek Community Church by offering the main campus

messages via simulcast. However, the regional campuses operate their own community service

offerings and worship teams and are led by individual campus pastors. They were each

highlighted in a special section of the United Center celebration by welcoming and honoring

each campus pastor on stage and allowing them to speak of their experiences at each regional

campus. Willow Creek also played a video montage that highlighted the worship teams from

each campus. The attention given to these campuses included them as an integral part of Willow

Creek and its evangelical mission, despite the fact that they spend their weekend services

worshipping in different locations.

The next step in the process turns from evangelism to growth for new Christians. Point

four seems to imply that there is a difference in service styles between the regular weekend service and what they call their Midweek (Wednesday night) service. By clarifying that the Midweek service offers more worship, prayer, and verse-by-verse Bible study, the implication is that average Sunday services offer something different. Inferentially, it seems that on regular weekends Willow Creek intentionally offers less worship, less prayer, and a teaching style that is not verse-by-verse. This difference gives audiences an inkling that Willow Creek is aiming to meet the needs of diverse groups of people. Initially, it does so by offering a less controversial and more welcoming weekend service. This differentiates Willow Creek from churches which do the bulk of their Christian teaching on Sunday mornings. Instead, it establishes Willow as a church that aims to welcome seekers during weekends, but then asks converted believers to attend at an additional time, so as to experience a deeper level of worship and study.

Beyond this, items five and six speak to Willow Creek's desire to encourage a deeper community of believers. Point five encourages believing individuals to join a small group. The purpose of the community offered in small groups is described using the same community terminology that was addressed in chapter three: "Making a commitment to a small band of brothers and sisters and telling them what's really going on in your life. Disclosing stuff that isn't going well and making commitments to one another that you're going to walk with each other through whatever life throws at you." This reference to the small group community affirms Willow Creek's desire to be more than a megachurch that allows for constant anonymity. Instead, they posture themselves as allowing that comfortable anonymity while individuals are unbelievers who may be seeking more information about the Christian faith, but discouraging the anonymity once individuals become believers. Instead, their spoken aim is to encourage

believers to participate in the church as an active community. Point six takes this further by encouraging the discovery of spiritual gifts, which are viewed as skills and abilities that enable individuals to serve actively and successful inside of the church. Bill Hybels speaks of these gifts as a way to contribute to the community of the church, to the body of believing Christians. They are discussed as an essential part of the church community – one that enables Willow Creek to function and thrive. This entire step-by-step process as presented by Willow Creek served as a way for the church to encourage its members to participate in and improve the current Willow Creek community. It pointed members toward the ideal that the church aims for, and provided suggestions for how a more perfect community might be attained.

In this same vein, certain ministries were highlighted as an integral part of what makes Willow Creek, Willow Creek. During the United Center celebration, focus was given to two ministries in particular. The first was the NextGen ministry that focuses on providing a place of learning and worship for children and young adults where these individuals can be esteemed and trusted as a powerful arm of the church. Second was the Special Friends ministry. This ministry serves the mentally, emotionally, and physically disabled, while also esteeming them in a way that allows them to teach and serve other members of the church body. In this way, Willow Creek's self-proclaimed aim is to serve others while esteeming the dignity of every person and believing that each one can contribute meaningfully to the work of the church. This served to further define the type of community Willow Creek aims to foster.

Pointing Out Disparity

Another common theme of Bill Hybels's spoken messages was the disparity between

Willow Creek and other Christian churches. Messages in the *Soundtrack* sermon series

referenced controversial decisions that had been made by Willow Creek: decisions that had

received derision from other Christian groups and had even caused some division within Willow

Creek's own congregation. Two of these controversies that Hybels chose to highlight were

Willow Creek's "seeker" services and their view of women in the church.

During the *Soundtrack* services (particularly the 1980s service), Bill Hybels addressed

how the mission and execution of Willow Creek Community Church's weekend services were

criticized by other Christians. Hybels first painted a background picture for his audience,

describing the 1980s as a decade of growth for Willow Creek. According to Hybels, this decade

featured a "decade long attendance increase" that ended up as 448% growth. The number of

staff grew from 9 to 100, and the church embarked upon six different building projects to allow

for the monumental growth. Hybels chose to position Willow Creek as a variant of the common

Christian church by referencing an alleged change in general Christianity's focus throughout the

centuries. He claimed that at one time, the Christian church (on a large scale, not just one

particular congregation) had been focused on gathering together for common, Christian

edification and then scattering in order to evangelize and bring the message of Jesus Christ to the

unbelieving world. Hybels then described a change in focus that, he claimed, led many

Christians to "devolve" into complete separation from secular culture and the unbelieving pagans

of that culture. At this point, rather than engaging their unbelieving neighbors in culture or in

faith, they aimed to focus solely on separation and on keeping themselves different from the secular culture. Hybels claimed the focus was on devotion to remaining holy and uncorrupted by the secular world. He portrayed this general Christian church as one failing in the evangelical mission of being spiritual light to a darkened world, then asserted that Willow Creek Community Church disagreed with this devolution. Its focus on the step-by-step process for members directly addressed what Willow Creek's proposed vision for the church was and Hybels related that it was Willow Creek's official position to not debate critics of their seeker-friendly mission, but instead to do their best "to do God's bidding." With a focus on what they believed their calling was, Willow Creek identified with the Christian mission of evangelism while also boldly proclaiming what they interpret as a disparity between their own church and others who denounce their particular focus on the unbelieving seeker.

Hybels also chose to highlight differences between Willow Creek and other congregations regarding their view on women holding leadership roles in the church. According to Hybels, in the 1980s Willow Creek appointed a team of elders to "distribute authority and responsibility." This leadership team was comprised of what he considered the four most respected and mature members of their congregation. Three were men and one was a woman. According to Hybels there was a group of church members who fiercely disagreed with this decision to place a woman in this leadership role. Hybels described the problem as an "uprising" and depicted Willow Creek's leadership team as being "clobbered" for inviting women to perform in any service role, including those of teaching and leading. In response to the outcry, Willow Creek leadership initiated a thorough study on the proper biblical role of women in church leadership. The study lasted eighteen months and was then presented to the entire

Willow Creek congregation. According to Hybels, the study of biblical text found that God

created man and woman "as full image bearers," which implied that both men and women

reflected God and his attributes equally. It asserted that after sin entered the world at the fall of

humanity through the story of Adam and Eve, the cooperative relationship that had previously

existed between man and woman was "wounded and marred." As a result, the perception of

inequality worked itself into the world of faith. However, referencing Galatians 3:27-28, the

study spoke of God's redemptive plan to restore everything, including equal roles of men and

women. Hybels related this historical narrative from Willow Creek's past, retelling how

hundreds of Willow Creek congregants left the church "nastily" and sought other places of

worship. In response, Willow Creek held more strongly to the study's findings and to their belief

that women could hold all leadership roles within the church. Hybels positioned this view as

being in agreement "with what the Bible teaches" thus elevating the church's findings to be in

agreement with God, rather than man. This particular decision made by Willow Creek

significantly separates it from many other Christian churches that hold to the belief that women

and men were created to serve in different capacities, as they are viewed as being gifted with

different skills and abilities.

Interestingly, despite this pronounced disparity in beliefs and service styles, Bill Hybels

used this scenario not to paint Willow Creek as a church that had things more "right" than other

congregations. Instead, he included the following plea to his congregation: "Please, Willow,

resist the temptation to judge, opinionate, or divide the body of Christ over how a church

conducts its services." He asked his audience to care enough for the body of Christ not to get too

attached to a Willow Creek ministry style, pointing out that Willow itself may change if the need

to reach more people dictates the need for change. In the service he encouraged members to discern which theological opinions should be held firmly, and which should be held loosely. He claimed that this view led Willow Creek to place biblical text from Titus 3:9 on their Willow Creek website: "But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless." The placement here is somewhat paradoxical. After having just claimed that disparity between Willow Creek's views and the views of other congregations could not be reconciled, Bill Hybels then taught his congregation that these concerns should not cause a rift between Willow Creek and other Christian groups. With a directive to wisely discern which theological beliefs should be argued for strongly and which should be held loosely to, Hybels chose to reconcile Willow Creek with other congregations, once again minimizing their differences. In this way, the church attempted to foster identification with the current Willow Creek community, even as it makes decisions that may not be popular with others outside the church. However, this identification that was encouraged within the Willow Creek community was not to the exclusion of the larger Christian community. Instead, Willow Creek encouraged members to remain unified with many other churches and denominations, as well, thus adding to the definition of its more perfect community ideal.

The Arts

Earlier in chapter three, ways that Willow Creek's focus on art and entertainment were analyzed for communication choices that intentionally reached out to secular audiences. A

second look at Willow Creek's art and entertainment reveals that the church addresses its

believing audience with a similarly artistic musical style. For example, at the beginning of each

Soundtrack service, contemporary worship songs with driving beats were performed while

simultaneously encouraging audience participation. The worship was intended to be

contemporary and relevant. In this way, it separated itself from the traditional church hymn.

Each anniversary service opened up with a few songs, none of which were conventional hymns,

but all were intended to encourage the congregation to worship along with the band. In a

significant nod to its contemporary focus, Willow Creek's song selections during the *Soundtrack*

services included only very recently produced songs. Almost all of the sixteen chosen had been

produced since 2012, with the only exceptions being one from 2010 and another from 2005.

Throughout each chosen worship song that opened the services, drums and electric guitars were

prevalent. Instrumental solos were even highlighted during the United Center service. Clapping

along was encouraged by the performers and dancing and hopping about the stage was a

common occurrence by both the vocal and instrumental artists. Worship was participatory, not

only in voice but in body. And it was loud: a far cry from traditional organ-led church hymns.

What differentiates this from the earlier focus on secular music, though, is that while these songs

were performed with similar enthusiasm and talent, Willow Creek did not shy away from

worship songs that would be unfamiliar to its secular audiences. Rather, Willow Creek

incorporated distinctly Christian music into its services, albeit in a contemporary form.

　　　Willow Creek also included a variety of worshipers in its songs. While the majority of

the music was played and sung by artists clearly chosen for their talent, two songs featured at the

United Center celebration were notable exceptions. Earlier in this chapter the NextGen and

Special Friends ministries were mentioned as being groups that aimed to esteem children and those with a variety of a disabilities. At separate times, a large number of representatives from these groups were welcomed on to the 360º stage to participate by leading the audience in a song of worship. Songs were loud, enthusiastic, and long. These groups were given time to shine in the spotlight of a huge stage, in front of an audience of more than 20,000. This incorporation of these groups into the musical worship of the 40th anniversary service served to authenticate Willow Creek's claims that they believe that every person has something valuable to add to the community at Willow Creek Community Church.

<div align="center">A Sense of (Musical) Nostalgia</div>

Willow Creek's choice of music included in its anniversary services did not just use new and unique methods but also had moments of combining respect for the past (both large-scale church past and individual Willow Creek Community Church past). Three of the songs included in the *Soundtrack* worship services did include a nod to more traditionally known hymns or church creeds, although these traditional works were given a contemporary makeover and were included only as a small portion of a more novel song. One such song was performed by a female vocalist. This song (DiMarco, 2013) used the repeated line "It is well with me," which is a contemporized version of the common church hymn, "It is Well with My Soul" written by Horatio Spafford in 1873. The connection between the two songs remains only loose supposition for its churched audience until the song culminates with a transition to the singing of the chorus of this exact hymn. The song thus combines historical church tradition with Willow

Creek's focus on contemporary culture and music. There were also two additional songs performed during the anniversary services that follow a similar structure. "This I Believe (The Creed)" (Crocker & Fielding, 2014) and "Cornerstone" (Myrin, Morgan, Liljero, & Mote, 2000) include lyrics taken directly from the traditional Apostle's Creed and "My Hope is Built" by Edward Mote. These well-known and time-honored lyrics are fused with a contemporary musical style and recently written additional lyrics, creating more original worship songs that are rooted in Christian traditions.

Another nod to combining the past with the contemporary present was the performance of a particular song titled "Little Pilgrim" (Girard, 1974) that was deemed as very important to Willow Creek during the 1970s. The song was performed by a vocal pianist. Despite the origination of this song in the 1970s, it was contemporized during this live performance to be more attractive to current audiences. During the *Soundtrack* service that honored the 1980s, a previous Willow Creek worship leader, Joe Horness, was welcomed on stage to lead the congregation in a worship set that nostalgically revisited the 80s and the worship music that was considered contemporary during that decade. Additionally, during the *Soundtrack* service that covered the 2000s, a worship leader who had been popular at Willow Creek during that decade, Tommy Walker, was welcomed on stage. His set included several songs that he had often played when leading worship at Willow Creek.

Each of these performances painted a picture of Willow Creek's intentional adaptation to music styles even as they change from year to year and decade to decade. They also seemed to paint a retrospective portrait of what contemporary worship looked like in the earlier decade. Choices like these lend high esteem to the founders who came before and in many ways further

Willow's vision and execution of a more contemporary worship style despite sounding "dated" by today's standards. The performance styles of Horness and Walker may have seemed old by today's standards, however, they would have been novel and contemporary during the 1980s or the 2000s. Willow Creek's issuance of an invitation for these performers to return to lead worship showcases a respect for its own church history while still acknowledging that the church has attempted to remain true to the times – however different those times may look during each decade. These communication decisions seemed to foster a community that would remain inclusive across decades, but would also encourage and esteem past and present participants. In this way, community was esteemed as something that is present and essential at Willow Creek Community Church.

<div align="center">Varying Art Forms</div>

Willow Creek's particular focus on art forms and their significant role in the church was highlighted during the United Center 40th anniversary service. Two creative directors took the stage and performed dramatic interpretations of their own testimonies related to the arts and Christianity. The first spoke of a life dedicated to the arts, but without fulfillment. Addictions took over until one day a friend introduced him to Willow Creek where he witnessed the combination of art and Christianity that brought him fulfillment like nothing he had experienced previously. The other spoke of a life that had always been rooted in the church and a love of all things dramatic – two things that, he claimed, he knew to be at odds with each other and mutually exclusive. Like the first, he also spoke of an encounter with Willow Creek church that

encouraged him by displaying an integration of faith and the arts that would eventually define his

life. Following these testimonies, a video montage was presented which highlighted artistic

moments from the forty years of Willow Creek's history. It included clips of skits and portions

of videos designed for various worship services. It displayed glimpses of dancing, painting, and

musicianship all designed to showcase art while teaching about or glorifying God. After the

video ended, the United Center was filled with the sounds of a long-string instrument. This

instrument was a set of long strings connected from the instrument base upward toward the

ceiling. A musician rubbed the strings in order to produce its unique sound. Lit creatively from

below, the lighting highlighted only the strings and its musician. Its music combined unique

tones and melodies with those of common hymns such as "Amazing Grace" and "Joyful, Joyful,

We Adore Thee." The performance artistically summarized the preceding testimonies,

combining a unique art form (several if one considers the lighting, the music, and the player-

performance) with the Christian faith.

In a creative twist on words, a vocal interpretation during the 36th anniversary service

offered hope for the role and responsibility of the local church. While text of the spoken words

displayed on the sanctuary's video screen, the words were spoken through a voice-over. At the

beginning of the service, the words from the left-hand column below were spoken. At the end of

the service, the lines were reversed in order, resulting in the words in the right-hand column.

Version 1	Version 2
The local church is the hope of the world?	God cares
No. As a matter of fact	I would be lying if I said
God no longer dwells here	That you can't turn things around
I don't believe	I am convinced
That joy is a possibility	God can
That our lives are better lived in community	And you're wrong if you believe
&	God can't help
That we are called to love each other radically	In the future it will be evident that
The truth is	Things will get better
The church is on the brink of extinction	It's impossible for me to believe
I refuse to believe that	Evil will never be defeated
We are part of a story larger than our own	Racism can't be overcome and
And	Poverty is too overwhelming
We have been changed to bring change	Don't be fooled
Don't be fooled	We have been changed to bring change
Poverty is too overwhelming	And
Racism can't be overcome and	We are part of a story larger than our own
Evil will never be defeated	I refuse to believe that
It's impossible for me to believe	The church is on the brink of extinction
Things will get better	The truth is
In the future it will be evident that	That we are called to love each other radically
God can't help	&
And you're wrong if you believe	That our lives are better lived in community
God can	That joy is a possibility
I am convinced	I don't believe
That you can't turn things around	God no longer dwells here
I would be lying if I said	No. As a matter of fact
God cares	The local church is the hope of the world!

In this creative and artistic twist, Willow Creek chose not to esteem its own congregation but, rather, focused on the Christian church as a whole. This allowed them to complement their service's focus (which was naturally on their own congregation celebrating its own anniversary) with a focus on the more general Christian church. Speaking on the role of the "local church" directed audiences to honor not only Willow Creek, nor only churches that ascribe to similar styles of worship. Rather, it ambiguously ascribes power to the more general "local" Christian church. The implication here is that Willow Creek is one such local church that has the power to

change the world through its community of church participants. Here Carey's (1989) focus on commonness and sharing is once again visible. Willow Creek communicates that it is through participation and sharing in their own local church that they are then able to bring that community to the world at large.

The video that began the United Center celebration, while visually appealing to all audiences, also spoke directly to Christian audiences. The beginning, which was highlighted in hues of green and red, spoke of the fall of humanity. Green may have represented the satanic serpent or the envy that led to Adam and Eve's sin. The red may have related to the assumed color of the fruit that was eaten, or the raging color of the sin that invaded the world with Adam and Eve's first acts of disobedience. Later in the video, crisp and cool blues were used during the references to the birth of Jesus, possibly referring to newness, the dusk of evening when the star of Bethlehem was to have been visible, or even the cold of winter, since the American Christmas is usually associated with cold and snow. Eventually, as the redemptive work of Jesus was portrayed, the screen flashed with white – perhaps a cleansing of the fallen, sinful world that had been. This entire video is ripe with artistry that is often absent from more traditional church services, which successfully paints Willow Creek as a church branded by its devotion to artistry.

In an artistic light display particularly aimed at Christian Willow Creek congregants, each individual present at the United Center celebration was gifted a bracelet that could light up in response to a finger tap. At certain moments in the anniversary service a speaker would request everyone who had served in or been impacted by a certain ministry to tap their bracelets. At these taps, the bracelets would light up in an identifying color (the colors changed depending on the ministry being referenced). This was a powerful use of modern technology that allowed each

person in the otherwise darkened arena to see the vast numbers of people involved with and

aided through Willow Creek. As such, it was clearly intended to impress audiences with the

reach of Willow Creek's service, but also to foster a pride in those who call Willow Creek

Community Church their home congregation. It esteemed the churchgoers and entered its

engaged community into a respect for the group of Christians that they belong to. It also fostered

a connected between attendees. Through just one visual, people were drawn into community

with those across the arena, highlighting the commonness that they could all share.

<center>Only God</center>

The most prevalent and obvious theme that surfaced out of the anniversary services was

the theme "Only God." The phrase defies categorization because of its prevalence throughout

the *Soundtrack* and 40th anniversary services.   Showcased during those six anniversary services

that took place during 2015, the phrase was plastered everywhere, on paper advertisements,

videoed advertisements, and in all the *Soundtrack* messages that referenced the upcoming 40th

anniversary. Once at the United Center for that anniversary, the phrase could be seen on both the

outside and inside of the building. Worship leaders at Willow Creek wrote a song titled, "Only

God" that was intended to be a sort of mantra for the entire season of the anniversary. The

phrase seemed to be fashioned as an intentional reminder that Willow Creek's status as a

growing and influential megachurch is not because it is innately better than other mainline

churches. Instead, the leadership at Willow Creek seemed to be intentionally reminding

themselves and the congregation that every ministry, every service, and every provided blessing

come neither directly from the church, nor from the members that make up the church. Instead, Willow Creek was encouraging members to be proud of their church but only so far as to be proud to be part of a larger plan – God's plan – which is not possessed solely by Willow Creek Community Church. Two words were fashioned in a number of ways in order to present a vivid and concise testimony of Willow Creek Community Church: they insist that their entire church is there and thriving as it is because of "Only God." This focus implied that the greatest ideal the community could aspire to would be the understanding that all good comes from God. In this, the community is connected together by unity not only with each other, but also a unity with God, who is portrayed as an essential participant in the perfect, ideal community of Christian believers.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

Chapter four has focused on discovering how the messages communicated through recent anniversary services communicated to Christian audiences. While Willow Creek is frequently referred to as a "seeker-friendly" church, a look at these services makes their focus on Christians equally apparent. Worship music and sermons and messages spoke to Christian audiences, encouraging them in their Christian faiths, Christian walks, and allowing them opportunities to worship God within services. References to the church's history encouraged an appreciation for those who helped establish the church and all those who have contributed as the years have gone on. The story of Willow Creek was never removed from the story of the larger, Christian church in general. While, at times, Willow Creek Community Church used theological and artistic

differences to differentiate itself from other congregations, overall it still asserted its place among the many local churches it claims to so highly esteem. In each of these things, Willow Creek aimed to foster a community branded by an encouraged focus on those outside of the church, as well as one dedicated to improving lives within the church. These improved lives were portrayed as an important way to further the communal mission of Willow Creek – building up and increasing the community present within the congregation.

5. CONCLUSION

Summary/Findings

This study sought to discover how Willow Creek Community Church communicates branding messages that relate to two main groups of attendees: those who do not believe in the Christian faith and those who do. It looked at communication messages as intentional attempts to build and foster a community that would align with Willow Creek's own branded message(s). For the analysis, the church anniversary service was used as a representative sampling of church branding messages that aim to inform audiences about organizational purposes and history. As Roger Ottewill (2011) noted, church anniversary services may speak of history, congregational concerns, and of aligning a congregation with other church bodies. In doing so, a church would be branding itself with a proposed identity that is rooted in its history. It would also be speaking into current concerns that may (or may not) align with historical intentions. Additionally, the church's claims and foci would present it as a unique entity, all the while encouraging identification between itself and other Christian churches. Each of these things speaks of a branding message that identifies and differentiates the congregation. It is framed as both unique and similar to other churches.

Employing James Carey's (1989) communication as culture framework, this study sought to assert the concepts of "commonness" and "community" in a study of communication. Through this, the study of Willow Creek Community Church's branding choices utilized during

their recent anniversary services aimed to discover how the messages imparted a sharing of beliefs (Carey, 1989) that aimed to construct a more ideal community by giving life an "overall form, order, and tone" (p. 21). This form was complemented by Eric Rothenbuhler's (2001) model of communication that establishes communication as a ritual action that aims to establish a more ideal community through the work of communicating. In this proposed model of study, communication is practiced and performed with the intention of molding communal interpretations. The intended end result is to create a community that is more unified in its perceptions and actions (Carey, 1989; Couldry 2003; 2004; 2006; Rothenbuhler, 2001).

For the purpose of this study, this ideal community would be defined by a desire to return to the perfect communion between individuals that existed before the biblical fall of humanity (Schultze, 2010). The community is further defined as one that forms more holy and righteous people that are not required to be uniformed in their actions or expressions of faith, but rather are esteemed for the value their diversity can bring to the community as a whole (Hauerwas, 1981). This value is found in an ability to identify with each other, both in spite of and in light of that diversity. While remaining essentially unique, members who identify with each other on even one point find common ground that makes them, in some aspect, "substantially one" (Burke, 1969/1962, p. 21). They remain distinct yet similar all at once.

This study sought to analyze the interaction of identification with the community-building nature of church communication. Specifically, this study looked into how achieving a more ideal Christian community would be attempted through the communication present at Willow Creek's anniversary services. In light of this, the study proposed two research questions:

1. How does Willow Creek Community Church use its anniversary services to brand itself

as a church that identifies with and separates itself from secular culture?

2. How does Willow Creek Community Church use its anniversary services to brand itself as a church that identifies with and separates itself from Christianity in general?

<u>A Focus on the Non-Christian</u>

Willow Creek Community Church is, quite obviously, a church led by Christian leadership. As such, that leadership operates under the assumptions of Christianity and the church's messages frequently center on that particular faith. This reality is not naturally conducive to attracting audience members who do not ascribe to similar religious ideals, as those individuals remain quite dissimilar from Willow Creek and its leadership. Despite this, however, this study found that Willow Creek's anniversary services seem to intentionally reach out to this non-Christian population. The content of the services appears to aim for a minimization of this disparity, though Willow Creek did not ignore those differences completely. This finding mirrored Burke's (1969/1962) assertions that identification would (and could) not exist without the presence of difference.

As Willow Creek sought to maintain a seeker-friendly service and atmosphere, much of the anniversary celebrations were focused on lower levels of spirituality and higher numbers of cultural references. Much of this cultural relevancy was introduced through the spoken messages most often delivered by Senior Pastor Bill Hybels. These aimed to teach and inform audiences through references that would be appropriate and familiar to even non-Christian audiences. These things typically were allusions to current events and history that would be shared by all

American audiences. While these communicative acts encouraged participation by the unchurched, they also fostered a picture of Willow Creek Community Church as a community that exists within a secular culture. They offered a two-fold accomplishment: 1) to welcome people unfamiliar with church and 2) to foster a community of people that esteems the inclusion of those individuals. Willow Creek's brand as a "seeker-sensitive" church clearly aims to foster a community that esteems an atmosphere that welcomes any and all.

Artistic endeavors were employed as a way to attract secular audiences. Music was the most prominent focus, as songs were performed with a loud, contemporary style and instrumentalists and vocalists brought the music to the audience with actions similar to those seen at secular concerts. Individual song choices frequently were ones that could appeal to those outside of the church and accompanying attire, background, and lighting were all designed for any audience, not only those familiar with Christianity. Additionally, universal messages were pronounced, as Willow Creek sought to highlight actions and endeavors that could be respected across religious lines. Things like serving the poor and hungry were used to define Willow Creek in its ultimate objectives. This served to align itself with more universal values. The end result, it seemed, was the intention of creating a welcoming atmosphere for non-believers that may have helped unify their own ideals to those of the church members. However, it does not seem that the branding choices did much for the fostering of a particular type of community within this non-Christian audience group. Aside from a few descriptions of the type of community Willow Creek aspired to, none of this directly encouraged non-Christians to stay or participate. Rather, the services were left open-ended and without mandates or expectations. Nothing was said to specifically encourage these individuals to remain and continue their

discovery of the church. Rather, audiences were left to their own devices in their decisions to return or not return to another Willow Creek service. It could be assumed that this omission was intentionally done in order to avoid the possibility of audiences feeling strong-armed, coerced, or guilted into returning. Regardless of the reasoning, the fact remains that while identification and communication seemed to be used intentionally for this audience, neither directly led to any sort of community-building that was directed at these non-Christian audiences. Instead, community seemed to be left vague and anonymous, content to let the individual choose, on his or her own, whether to enter more deeply into the church and its Christian community.

A Focus on the Christian

Christians, on the other hand, were on the receiving end of communication that was much more direct in its aim to foster a more ideal community. They were encouraged to join Willow Creek in its goals and aims, be they spiritual, individual, or cultural. Spoken messages from Bill Hybels or other leaders were direct in communal aims of the church. Things like their seven-step member-focus urged Christian audiences to ascribe to the ideals of evangelism and deeper Christian community. Spiritual lessons were taught to encourage Christian audiences to consider God in new or adjusted ways. In most of them, Christians were encouraged to participate in the culture around them, called to effectively mirror the intentional purposes of Willow Creek Community Church. Additionally, Christian audiences were led to take pride in their own congregation. In various ways Willow Creek set itself apart from other Christian congregations by demonstrating its focus on specific instances of profound service, and its theological

conclusions that separate it significantly from other churches and/or denominations. These things seemed to esteem Willow Creek's own congregation and entered its engaged community into a respect for the body of Christians they belonged to. Stories like those of church individuals who initiated their own acts of service (which eventually led the church leadership to follow) were included as a potential source of pride for members. Successes of a group are things that any and all group members are inclined to claim for themselves. This identification was also profoundly present during the United Center celebration, which frequently showcased vast numbers of individuals who had been served by or had served in particular ministries. Even groups that would initially, seem dissimilar from large portions of the church community (such as children or the disabled) were esteemed, highlighted, and given a place to serve. This encouraged all members to identify with various groups they may not have otherwise, thus building a community that encouraged identification where none may have been seen otherwise.

Similar to the communication aimed at non-Christians, contemporary music and artistry seemed to address the Christian as well. For centuries, traditional services that employed hymns within the liturgy were the norm in the Christian church (Johnson et al., 2010). However, in an attempt to be culturally relevant, Willow Creek Community Church focuses on the use of sacred music that offers a more contemporary style. Hymns were seldom used and, when they were, presented themselves only as snippets that were used in a more contemporary worship song. Culturally relevant music aimed at non-Christian audiences was intended to be just as engaging and entertaining to Christians. Various other art forms also appealed to an artistically inclined audience, but also were clear in their messages to Christians. Various ways of living were denounced or encouraged through skits or spoken word. Focus on God as a giver and provider

were themes throughout dramatized narratives and video clips. Choreographed dance numbers

alluded to the need for community across racial lines. These instances and more encouraged

Christian audiences to consider their own lives and how they may or may not live up to the

standard of community being touted by Willow Creek. Unlike the community of unbelievers

that was left vague, anonymous, and without request or requirement, Christian members were

urged to more fully enter into a deep local and global community rife with the expectation of

contribution and devotion. Willow Creek seemed to encourage identification within its own

church body, but also identification with the more general Christian church by esteeming

Christianity as a powerful potential actor throughout the world in which it resides.

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