

**“Pull up a Chair and Join in”: The Collective Creation of Space on the United Church
of Canada’s WonderCafe website**

By

Morgan Hunter

Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the M.A. degree in Religious Studies

Department of Classics and Religious Studies
Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa

Abstract

In 2006, the United Church of Canada developed a website, WonderCafe.ca, that provided space for internet users to engage in discussions about religion and spirituality online. This website balanced user freedom to explore any topic of discussion with promoting the United Church to visitors. The website uses Web 2.0 technology, which gives internet users a great amount of freedom to shape the space that they participate in online. Using Kim Knott's spatial analysis, this thesis explores the types of spaces created by the United Church and WonderCafe users. It also seeks to understand the factors that lead to the creation of WonderCafe, the tensions present on the website over its purpose, how one understands community online, the types of values highlighted within this community, and how internet space differs from offline space.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Chapter One: Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1 Outline of Thesis..... | 2 |
| 1.2 Literature Review..... | 5 |
| 1.2.1 Studies of Religion on the Internet..... | 5 |
| 1.2.2 Studies of Religion in Canada..... | 17 |
| 1.2.3 Marketing Religion | 22 |
| 1.2.4 Summary | 22 |
| 1.3 Methodology | 23 |
| 1.3.1 Methods of Analysis | 24 |
| 1.3.2 Data Collection..... | 28 |
| 1.3.3 Conclusion..... | 33 |
| Chapter Two: The Creation of WonderCafe..... | 34 |
| 2.1 The United Church before WonderCafe..... | 35 |
| 2.1.1 A brief history of the United Church of Canada | 35 |
| 2.1.2 A Canadian Church in Decline | 43 |
| 2.1.3 Tech-Savvy Church..... | 44 |
| 2.1.4 Summary | 46 |
| 2.2 Increase of Marketing Religion..... | 46 |
| 2.3 Web 2.0 Technology | 49 |
| 2.4 Combatting Decline..... | 51 |
| 2.5 Conclusion..... | 55 |
| Chapter Three: Revealing Tensions Online: Representations of the United Church on WonderCafe..... | 58 |
| 3.1 Spiritual Exploration and Open-Mindedness..... | 59 |
| 3.1.1 How WonderCafe describes itself..... | 60 |
| 3.1.2 How Smith Roberts Describes WonderCafe | 62 |
| 3.1.3 Paint Your Faith | 63 |
| 3.1.4 Guidelines of Conduct..... | 65 |
| 3.1.5 Safe Spiritual Exploration | 66 |
| 3.2 Church Leadership | 66 |
| 3.2.1 Church Search | 67 |
| 3.2.2 Moderator Mardi Tindal..... | 69 |
| 3.2.3 Spirit Express | 70 |
| 3.2.4 Usernames | 71 |
| 3.2.5 Website Guidelines | 72 |
| 3.2.6 Church Leadership Online | 72 |
| 3.3 Uncovering Website Values..... | 73 |
| 3.3.1 Main Page Photos..... | 74 |
| 3.3.2 Poll Questions | 77 |
| 3.3.3 Links..... | 78 |
| 3.3.4 Twitter Feed | 81 |
| 3.4 Conclusion..... | 85 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Chapter Four: User Identity and Negotiation on WonderCafe..... | 88 |
| 4.1 WonderCafe Users | 89 |
| 4.1.1 WonderCafe User Demographics | 90 |
| 4.1.2 Religious Identity of WonderCafe Users | 92 |
| 4.2 User Activities Online | 94 |
| 4.2.1 Create a Profile..... | 94 |
| 4.2.2 Groups | 95 |
| 4.2.3 Blogs | 96 |
| 4.2.4 Discussion Boards..... | 97 |
| 4.3 WonderCafe as an Online Community | 97 |
| 4.3.1 Interactivity | 98 |
| 4.3.2 Stability of Membership..... | 99 |
| 4.3.3 Stability of Identity | 99 |
| 4.3.4 Netizenship and Social Control..... | 102 |
| 4.3.5 Personal Concern | 104 |
| 4.3.6 Occurrence in Public Space | 104 |
| 4.3.7 Summary | 105 |
| 4.4 Properties of Space in User Activity on WonderCafe..... | 106 |
| 4.4.1 Configuration | 107 |
| 4.4.2 Extension..... | 115 |
| 4.4.3 Simultaneity | 120 |
| 4.4.4 Power..... | 122 |
| 4.5 Religion Online or Online Religion | 127 |
| 4.6 Conclusion..... | 132 |
| Chapter Five: Conclusion..... | 133 |
| 5.1 Avenues for further research | 140 |
| Appendix I..... | 143 |
| Bibliography | 144 |

Chapter One: Introduction

One morning in November 2006, people across Canada woke to a picture of a bobbled-headed Jesus on the cover of their *Globe and Mail*. That morning newspaper featured a front-page story on a new initiative from the United Church of Canada: WonderCafe, a website designed to connect Canadians with spiritual discussion and the United Church. To kick-start interest in the campaign, the United Church had launched a series of six print advertisements across a range of Canadian magazines. One of these ads inserted Jesus in place of Santa at a shopping mall. Another placed two male cake toppers on a wedding cake. Yet another superimposed the question: “How much fun can sex be before it is a sin?” on the image of whipped cream inside a fridge door. These ads were unusual. They got people talking, and were picked up by the media across Canada, including *The Globe and Mail*, as well as by news outlets in the United States.

While these advertisements were designed to grab audience attention, their primary aim was to bring people to the WonderCafe site, at www.wondercafe.ca. This website offered space for users to create blogs, form groups and, most importantly, engage in the discussion boards. Although the website grew out of the United Church’s Emerging Spirit campaign, when that campaign ended in 2010, WonderCafe continued. The decision to continue the website as a stand-alone initiative after the end of the project that launched it indicates that the United Church has, at least to some extent, found WonderCafe to be a useful addition to the Church.

From its inception, this website was designed to highlight user-created content, rather than official statements from the Church, and it has evolved as participation has continued over the years. Internet space provides an interesting medium in that it is easy to change, especially on discussion boards where users shape the daily flow of thoughts. At the same

time, its content can be archived and searched, so that new and old data can be studied. WonderCafe, for example, keeps an easily accessible record of all conversations on the discussion boards from the first days of the website.

This thesis examines how WonderCafe, the website of a church in crisis, becomes host to multiple interests and voices. The users of WonderCafe, at all levels of the United Church as well as non-affiliated members, participate in creating content on WonderCafe. Thus, WonderCafe becomes a window into the concerns of the users of the website. This thesis offers an exploration of a medium for religious expression and discussion that has only been studied at a very limited level, despite the fact that the internet is a medium that people in Canadian society use to a greater and greater degree. This thesis also provides a look into the tensions and negotiation within the United Church as it struggles with declining membership and establishing its place in the 21st Century.

While the United Church's declining membership follows a familiar trend in liberal Protestant denominations, this thesis does not explicitly explore the decline of membership in the United Church. Further, while this thesis touches on some theories of secularisation, particularly those that link religious success to a market system model, this thesis does not attempt to locate WonderCafe within secularization theory in general. The focus of this thesis instead is on the creation and use of the WonderCafe website. This thesis presents a focused case study of one church's use of with internet technology.

1.1 Outline of Thesis

This thesis attempts to better understand how users of WonderCafe create their own space online by exploring WonderCafe through six questions: 1) What were the internal factors within the Church that led to the creation of the website? What external factors

contributed to its creation? 2) How are tensions within the United Church over the purpose of the website evident in content and other aspects of WonderCafe? 3) When users have the power to create their own spaces online, what types of spaces do they create? How do these spaces manifest themselves on WonderCafe? 4) How does one identify a community online? Further, how can one understand a religious community online? 5) How is online space similar to physical space, and in what aspects does it differ? This is especially important in light of Kim Knott's work on the spatial analysis of physical space, which is a key theoretical and methodological guide for this project. 6) What values are presented as United Church Values and how do the users of WonderCafe reinforce these values through their activities on this site?

Chapter Two of this thesis examines the circumstances under which WonderCafe was created. This chapter begins by examining the first question above, and explores the forces leading to the development of the website. Four topic areas are key to this section: 1) the way in which the history and decisions made by the United Church created an environment that could accept WonderCafe as a United Church initiative; 2) the role of studies that view religious success through market theory in contributing to an understanding that religion was a commodity that could be sold to people; 3) the degree to which the use of mainstream advertising as a way to sell religious ideas became more prevalent before the United Church started its advertising campaign; and 4) the impact of the development of Web 2.0. This chapter then turns to an exploration of the formation of WonderCafe through the Emerging Spirit campaign, a United Church initiative designed to reignite interest in religion and spirituality among Canadians who did not attend church at that time.

Chapter Three explores the content of WonderCafe that is not user-created, that is, content that is sponsored by the leadership of the Church rather than visitors to the website.

On the one hand, WonderCafe offers a space for spiritual exploration for participants with loose ties to the United Church. On the other hand, it also offers space for the United Church leadership itself to promote Church initiatives and solicit input for more official Church discussions. What becomes evident upon investigating both aspects of site content is that tensions exist related to the purpose of WonderCafe, especially over time. As a result, the majority of the third chapter concerns itself with the second question above.

Chapter Four explores the users on WonderCafe. Key to this exploration is the third question above, related to the ways in which users on WonderCafe create their own space for many activities within and apart from the space intended for spiritual exploration and promotion of the United Church. In order to better understand the virtual world of WonderCafe, this chapter additionally examines the fifth question by trying to better identify the ways in which WonderCafe is like a community. To address this, the chapter begins with an analysis of the participants and the types of activities that they can take part in. The discussion then moves into an analysis of the properties of space on WonderCafe in relation to users' activities online, and in so doing, touches on the issues raised in question five, above. The chapter ends with an assessment of how user activities on WonderCafe can be understood in terms of the distinctions made by Christopher Helland between religion online and online religion, as well as the concept of virtual religion. Finally, throughout this chapter there are examples of how users reinforce United Church values through their activities, which offer a way to understand the sixth and final question.

In summary, this thesis explores how one can understand virtual space in the context of WonderCafe. WonderCafe hosts tensions within the United Church over future directions for the church, and also displays the ways in which members of this online community make their own space on WonderCafe for discussions beyond the Church's more official interests.

This thesis explores how internet technology can both challenge and reinforce the messages put forward by a religious community, and it looks at the ways in which users, if allowed to create their own space online, will do so in unexpected ways. As North American society moves into the fifteenth year of popular internet use and the internet therefore becomes more and more a part of everyday life, this thesis offers insight into one experiment with Web 2.0 technology on the part of one religious community.

1.2 Literature Review

There are three streams of literature that inform this study of the United Church of Canada's WonderCafe website. The first stream includes literature about internet technology, specifically studies that concern themselves with religion and the internet. Such studies are important in this context because they examine the implications and effect that internet technology has had on religious organisations. The second stream comprises studies of religion in Canada. These studies provide context for the position of the United Church within Canadian society. The final stream relates to studies of religion and marketing. Such studies are important because they can be used to build an understanding of the context within which the United Church of Canada chose to work with an advertising agency, Smith Roberts, to promote the church.

1.2.1 Studies of Religion on the Internet

Studies that examine the ways in which religion is used or portrayed on the internet make up only a small portion of research about the internet itself. While these wider explorations of the internet branch in many different directions, the studies of most relevance to this thesis are those that explore the ways in which people use the internet to interact with

each other. Unsurprisingly, that work extends beyond specific studies of religion on the internet into explorations of how people use the internet in general, as well as the impact of the internet on society. These studies are important in the context of this thesis because they highlight the potential of the internet as, among other objectives, a marketing vehicle and virtual community for religious groups, including the United Church of Canada. Moreover, these studies offer insights into the ways in which individuals may use the internet, and its impact on their lives.

1.2.1.1 Influential Studies of the Internet

A key theorist in studies of the internet is Manuel Castells. Although his work does not touch specifically on religion, Castells' insights into the ways in which technological innovations have affected social connections are key to understanding internet communities. In his 1996 book, *The Rise of Network Society*, Castells argues that innovation within information and communications technology has restructured the ways by which people connect with each other. Rather than relying on immediate personal contacts, information technology allows people to connect easily and quickly across great distances. Castells argues that this reorders social connections, moving away from location-based contacts to expanded contacts across the world. The effect of the internet on social relations is that it provides the medium through which these connections can happen. Thus, internet users may form meaningful relationships with people whom they may never meet face to face. Internet users may also maintain strong relationships with others they once knew locally but who have since moved away. The internet increases the ease through which a new range of connection is possible.

Castells further develops his ideas about the way in which the internet affects human relationships in his subsequent book, *The Internet Galaxy* (2001). In this, he argues that, despite a few exceptions,¹ most studies about the internet in people's lives show that while the internet may change how people communicate with one another, its effects on relationships have been greatest in terms of extending the number of people an individual can be in contact with, as well as in increasing the frequency of that contact. Castells argues that the internet has led to an increase in the individual's ability to navigate their own social connections. He calls this shift the "triumph of the individual" (133). For the most part, however, he says the majority of internet users continue to connect with people they already know, primarily through email (118-125). Castells writes that the internet has had an important impact with respect to mobilizing social movements and connecting people within social movements to each other. He also determines that the internet is an easy way to quickly disseminate information (140-143).

Castells' work spans far beyond examining how people use the internet for social connections. He also examines tensions on the internet over whether internet technology should be harnessed for its ability to move beyond social and class distinctions, or should be used to make a profit. On the one hand, the internet could be made available to anyone and kept open to all users for creative uses and to build connections. On the other, users' ability to connect could be limited or harnessed for commercial ends (152-153). One way to make a profit is by gathering aggregate (or not-so-aggregate) data on the users of a website to sell to advertising companies to better target their desired audience. As internet usage increases, so too does the data collected about people online, which is not always used with the most honest intentions (168-187). This tension between the internet as a space for user exploration

¹ See for example Kraut *et al* 1998.

² See the Vatican website at www.vatican.ca

³ In a 2000 article, Bibby wrote that the idea of Canada as a mosaic was misguided because Canada continues to

with few guidelines and as a space for making a profit is an important distinction when studying the tensions on WonderCafe over user freedom and promoting the United Church.

Since Castells' wrote *The Internet Galaxy*, the ways in which individuals use the internet have changed. More recent studies highlight new developments that have resulted from Web 2.0 technology, which puts the user at the centre of their internet experience by allowing them to make a personal imprint on almost any website they visit. Users are no longer expected to be passive recipients of information but are encouraged to offer their own interpretations of any data that sites provide to them. Social networking sites are a key outcome of this technology; these are websites where users create individual profiles they can then use to interact with other people online and share information (Corrocher 2011; Lim and Palacios-Marques 2011; Thomas and Sheth 2011). Studies of internet use among younger people report that social networking is overtaking email as the most common internet activity (Tsotsis 2011).

1.2.1.2 Key Discussions in Religion and the Internet Studies

Studies that focus specifically on religion and the internet can be organised into two broad categories. In the first category are those that consider how to study religion on the internet; these include research into defining online religious communities, understanding the forms that religion can take online, and understanding the adoption and use of internet technology by religious communities. In the second category are studies that focus on what religious users themselves do with internet technology and the potential impact it can have; these include research into the impact of the internet on traditional authority structures, the ways in which religious people, particularly in diaspora communities, use the internet, and the quest for virtual religion.

1.2.1.2.1 How to study religion on the internet

It is important to first understand the ways by which one can approach the study of religion and the internet. Although there has not been a lot of work on this, three directions have emerged that are important for this thesis. The first is Dawson's work on identifying religious communities online. The second is Helland's work on conceiving the forms that religion can take online. The third is Campbell's work on understanding the relationships religious groups have had with technology over time. These works contribute to this thesis through the approaches that they have developed for the study of the internet and religion.

1.2.1.2.1.1 *Defining religious communities:*

A common question in studies of religion and the internet touches on the ways in which it is possible to understand whether the people interacting online are part of a community. This is a difficult question—and one that does not have an easy answer in the offline world, either. The most simple answer, “I know it when I see it,” is difficult to apply with any credibility. Creating a method of understanding online group dynamics is important in order to distinguish between casual contacts and groups of people who interact frequently and have formed meaningful connections among their members. Lorne L. Dawson (2004) makes a distinction between these categories by listing six elements that signal the presence of an internet community: interactivity, stability of membership, stability of identity, netizenship and social control, personal concern and the occurrence in public space. At a basic level, interactivity means that members are able to communicate with each other. It also means that communications is not directed from one to many but takes place from many to many. In addition, interactivity seeks to find a sequence to what is posted online, and whether posts recognise and relate to earlier posts. Stability of membership comprises the

idea that members post frequently over an extended period of time. Stability of identity is based on how well members maintain one identity online. As anonymity is easily achieved on many sites, this factor considers the degree to which members of a potential internet community retain one identity and how much of themselves they reveal within that identity. Netizenship and social control look at the ways in which rules are developed and maintained, for example whether there are guidelines for use of the site, and whether members correct inappropriate behaviour. Personal concern relates to whether members of the site have an interest in each other that extends beyond what happens on the website into their personal lives. Occurrence in public space means that activity on the site can be found by prospective members. This does not mean that some activities cannot take place in private, but considers whether at least some community activity is visible to anyone (76-78).

1.2.1.2.1.2 *Understanding the forms that religion can take online:*

The most prominent framework for understanding the forms that religion can take on the internet is the online religion/religion online distinction, first posited by Christopher Helland in his 2000 article, "Online religion/religion online and virtual communitas," which has become a staple for studies in this field. At the most basic level, groups that fall within the religion online category are those that feature an offline component and, in fact, exist primarily offline. For them, the internet is a tool to share their ideas and teachings with users, and to share information about services and events. The website for the Vatican exemplifies this, hosting a wealth of wide-ranging information about the Catholic Church, from theological doctrines to formerly secret archives. The Vatican website can be considered a classic example of religion online because there are no links to outside sources and all

information is given in a top-down fashion.² By contrast, online religion does not require an offline component. Information is expected to be shared equally, with very little hierarchy involved. Interactions are neither regulated nor prescribed, and users are free to network in any way they choose. An online religion website does not try to keep users within its own information constraints, and therefore features links to other sites. Helland's definitions have been built on by other scholars, who understand this distinction as taking place on a spectrum (Hadden and Cowan 2000). More recent examinations of this theme have found that most religious activity on the internet is located at the religion online end of the spectrum, and does not take full advantage of all of the features the internet offers (Dawson 2005; O'Leary 2004).

1.2.1.2.1.3 *Understanding adoption and use of internet technology by religious communities:*

A final guideline to approaches for studying religion on the internet is Heidi Campbell's (2010) analytical framework of Religious Social Shaping of Technology. Campbell developed this method to move away from technologically determinant ways of understanding the impact of the internet on a religious community. It seeks instead to understand a religious community's interactions with technology by interpreting its actions under four categories. The first is through understanding the history of technological relations within the tradition, which looks at how the tradition reacted to developments in media and technology in the past (60). The second examines the core beliefs and patterns of the group, including how a tradition actually lives out its core values in the contemporary situation (60-61). The third relates to the negotiation process that takes place when a community is faced with new technological developments (61). The final category focuses

² See the Vatican website at www.vatican.ca

on communal framing and discourse about new technology, which examines what communities do and how they justify the use of new technology after it has been introduced (61-62).

1.2.1.2.2 How religious people and groups use the internet

One common area of inquiry in studies of religion and the internet relates to examining how members of a religious group actually use the internet and the impact that their internet use may have on the religious tradition. Work within this field falls within three main areas. The first is the impact that internet use can have on traditional authority structures. The second encompasses the ways in which religious people use the internet to connect with members of their tradition, a factor that is particularly important for members of diaspora communities. The third focuses on the possibility of virtual religious communities.

1.2.1.2.2.1 *The impact of the internet on traditional authority structures:*

The ability to connect beyond one's home community has meant that the internet has been seen as a challenging force to religious authority. Rather than relying on messages from traditional religious authority figures, users can find new teachings that they may find hold more meaning for their lives and concerns. Helland, for example, argues that the internet is better suited for horizontal communication, which makes traditional top-down information chains far less appealing to those looking for religion on the internet (Helland 2000). Perhaps for this reason, internet technology is directly challenged by some religious authorities, including ultra-orthodox Jewish communities, which try to ban its use. Regardless, many ultra-orthodox Jews use the internet for personal and business communication and have

found creative ways to make the technology fit within the regulations of their religion (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005; Campbell 2010).

The internet may also challenge authority as it enables users to become exposed to different religious ideas. As a result of this exposure, less prominent traditions may thrive online. For example, studies of Islam have shown that religious teachings that are not as popular on the ground are able to gain a place on the internet (Lawrence 2002). Studies of Sufi websites, for example, have shown a certain degree of popularity (Bunt 2006, 2000; Larsson 2006) while, conversely, the internet has also been seen as a place to connect members of militant Islamic groups (Halledèn 2006). Another example is the case of Amru Khaled, an Egyptian Muslim religious teacher who uses the internet to communicate with his followers, especially after going into exile from his country to the United Kingdom (Maraini, 2006).

The ability to work outside of traditional authority structures has meant that pagan communities, which encourage personal communication with the divine and finding one's own path, have embraced the internet for connecting and sharing information in a way that does not readily position one user above another (Cowan 2005; Arthur 2002).

1.2.1.2.2.2 *The ways in which religious people, particularly in diaspora communities, use the internet:*

Religion as a topic has attracted vibrant discussion since the early days of the internet, when people visited newsgroups and discussion boards to debate and share ideas (Hadden and Cowan 2000, Cowan 2000). In his 2007 piece, Christopher Helland examines religious discussion on USENET networks in 1983. At that time, there was so much discussion about religion on the general board that non-religious users became irritated

enough to ask for a religion-focused board to isolate that topic, and soon after, net.religion was established (958-959). Over the next few years, members of non-Christian religious groups in turn demanded their own newsgroups so that they did not have to sift through all of the Christian discussion to find the posts that interested them (960-961).

As the technology of the internet has changed, users have taken advantage of advances to create new ways to communicate. For example, as with most internet users (Castells 2001, 193), email is an important tool for communication among members of religious communities (Bedell, 2000). In her study of Christian email listservs, Heidi Campbell (2005) found that prayer request became a staple of many of these groups. Email allows users to share their life and spiritual struggles with each other and request support from others. Beyond email, websites of religious groups are important for sharing information, such as times of services and community events, among members (Bedell, 2000). Websites also act as central contact points for those with similar interests and as conduits to introduce messages to outsiders. In his study of websites devoted to Marian apparitions, Apolito (2005) showed how these networks connected, reinforced each other's claims and introduced messages to outsiders. Although sharing information with outsiders may be a key goal for many religious websites (Beckerlegge 2001; Kawabata and Tamura 2007), the internet has not been a particularly successful tool on a large scale for recruiting new people to religious communities (Hadden and Cowan 2000; Hoover and Park 2004). In fact, it is a far more useful tool for anti-religious or anti-cult movements. The way information is shared on the internet, in particular the effortless with which information may be disseminated without checking facts, means that it is very easy to spread negative anecdotes and images about religious groups (Introvigne 2000; Meyer 2000).

One place where internet communication has become particularly influential is within diaspora communities. The internet allows users to connect over great distances in a short amount of time. Communication is often asynchronous, meaning that while there may be a back and forth between users, there is often a time lapse between replies. This also means that it is easy for people to take part in a conversation across locations and time zones (Helland 2007). For diaspora communities, the internet serves not only as a tool to connect to the homeland but also as a tool to connect members of diaspora communities in different locations. Research within the Sikh community highlights the importance of the internet in creating the idea of a cohesive international Sikh community (Axel 2005). As well, the internet in Islam has been an important tool to link Muslims across the world and across ethnic backgrounds and nationalities (Schmidt 2006; Lawrence 2002; Larsson 2006; Bunt 2000, 2005). I would suggest that the internet serves similar purposes for the United Church on WonderCafe. Although the United Church is not a global organisation, it exists across Canada, a country that spans six time zones. The internet provides opportunities for members to connect across the country and form community bonds that extend within and beyond their home locations.

1.2.1.2.2.3 *The quest for virtual religion:*

The final area of studies on religion and the internet focuses on virtual religion online. Much of this research examines online communities that are located closer to the online religion, or religion on the internet, end of the spectrum. These studies are important because of what they are looking for: growing, dynamic and contemporary forms of online religion that are very different from traditional religious forms, in particular with relation to religious hierarchies (Brasher, 2004). However, many researchers seeking examples of this

new form of religion on the internet end up finding very little. For example, Cowan's study of pagan religious communities online found that despite the great presence of pagans online, few pagans practice religion as an online community only. While there may be many cyber-covens, most do not actually have any members; for those that do, the internet usually serves as a portal to communicate about offline activities (Cowan 2005). Dawson's (2005) study of religious ritual online finds that despite the potential for ritual activity online, very little is actually taking place (31). The concept of virtual religion is important to keep in mind when studying the WonderCafe website, as it leads to further explorations as to whether WonderCafe has the potential for virtual religion.

1.2.1.2.3 Challenges to the Study of Religion on the Internet

There are a number of challenges inherent in the study of religion and the internet. First, it is a relatively new field of study and thus there are many gaps in knowledge. Second, the internet itself is new enough that it is impossible to have a fully comprehensive understanding of its impact on religious communities. Third, the landscape of the internet is constantly changing. The internet remains largely text-based, although video is becoming increasingly prominent, but that text does not remain static as it does in books. Instead, it is constantly being updated, erased and responded to. An article that is online one day may disappear the next or become buried a week later when the website where it is posted is updated. At times, websites may be completely overhauled and all initial content lost. Fourth and finally, this quickly changing nature means that academic work focusing on the internet quickly becomes out of date. An article published in 2001 would not have been able to predict the development of Web 2.0 technology, with its ensuing emphasis on user

participation. Further, an article published in 2005 would not have been able to predict the impact of mobile technology on the ease and ability for users to be connected all the time.

Despite these challenges, there are sufficient studies of religion and the internet—and sufficient information from these studies—to help locate WonderCafe within the spectrum of online technology. These studies give the context from which WonderCafe developed, and also offer ways to understand how WonderCafe itself, along with the experiences of users on WonderCafe, fit into the context of internet use in general. Frameworks such as Helland’s (2000) religion online and online religion distinction, as well as Dawson’s (2004) work on internet communities, give lenses through which WonderCafe can be examined. Further, discussions of the importance of internet technology to diaspora communities and debates about the existence of virtual religion offer additional areas of examination.

1.2.2 *Studies of Religion in Canada*

Equally important to this discussion are studies of religion in Canada. These studies provide the context from which the United Church of Canada has emerged on the Canadian landscape. Two areas of research are important: studies that examine religion in general in Canada, and studies that focus specifically on the United Church.

1.2.2.1 Canada

At this time, there are few longitudinal studies of religion in Canada. Many of those that exist focus most of their attention on Christian religions within Canada (Choquette 2004; O’Toole 2006; Van Die 2001), which should not be surprising, given the dominance of Christianity in the Canadian population. In 2001, 72% percent of Canadians reported themselves as either Roman Catholic or Protestant on the Canadian census (Statistics Canada

2003, 5). A number of edited collections, however, have highlighted the diversity of religious traditions within Canada (Beaman and Beyer 2008; Bramadat and Seljak 2009; Devries, Baker and Overmyer 2010; Harding, Hori and Soucy 2010), as well as the diversity within Christianity in Canada (Bramadat and Seljak 2008). The population of those who do not affiliate as Christian increased significantly between the 1991 and 2001 census, when the Hindu population increased by 89%, Sikh 89% and Buddhists 84% (Statistics Canada 2003, 8). Further, those who do not affiliate with any religion increased to 16% of the population during those years (Statistics Canada 2003, 9).

Studies of trends in the Canadian religious landscape have also included studies that examine the changes in that landscape, especially the trends in decreasing commitment to traditional religious networks among Canadians. Key among these studies is the research of Reginald W. Bibby who's 2004 *Restless Gods* was his third book studying religious trends in Canada. His focus is for the most part Christian.³ In *Restless Gods*, Bibby argues that despite the decrease in attendance and affiliation in Canada, Canadians are thirsting for religion; churches simply need to tap into this interest and give Canadians what they are seeking. His ideas about the nature of changes to Canadian religiosity and the potential of the reinvigoration of Christianity within the country have been challenged more recently by Thiessen and Dawson (2008), who argue that while Bibby's research has made important contributions to our knowledge about religion in Canada, his research has some significant limitations. They argue that "...the future of religion in Canada may lie with the development of the new tastes and preferences manifested in the more private spiritual practices of many Canadians" (412).

³ In a 2000 article, Bibby wrote that the idea of Canada as a mosaic was misguided because Canada continues to have a significant Christian majority.

Thus, the contemporary United Church of Canada exists within a country that has been dominated by Christianity, but where growing immigration, which increases the religious diversity of non-Christian religions, as well as the increase of non-affiliation with any religion have challenged the significance of Christianity. At the same time, the United Church exists within a context where commitment to religious organizations is decreasing among the traditionally church-going population.

1.2.2.2 United Church of Canada

If there are few studies of religion in Canada, there are even fewer of the United Church of Canada itself. Among these are two important discussions of the merger of churches that created the United Church. The first is Silcox's 1933 study, one of the first written about this church, which offers a background into the forces leading to its formation, a discussion of the negotiations involved, and an outline of its early years. The second is Grant's (1967) study of the reasons behind the mergers. For this thesis, these documents help build an understanding of the forces that formed the United Church and its resulting identity.

More recent studies of the United Church have focused on two areas: the acceptance of sexual diversity within the Church and its increasing ethnic diversity. Of these, studies of sexual diversity are far more common. An early entry into this field, O'Toole *et al* (1993), examined the decision within the Church to ordain openly gay ministers and the conflict that resulted. Later studies have focused on the acceptance of same sex marriage. As examples, Nedelsky and Hutchinson (2008) examine the negotiation process between congregations and members of the Church as they individually determined whether to perform same sex marriage, while Pamela Dickey Young's work examines the political and religious responses of churches in Canada, including the United Church, to same sex marriage. Ng's work

(2009) offers an overview of the increasing ethnic diversity within the United Church. She explores how the Church, traditionally made up of those with British ancestry, has integrated new communities within the fold.

These works on diversity offer a way to understand the contemporary situation of the United Church of Canada, and help to build an understanding of current issues. They highlight ongoing negotiations within the Church over its identity, as well as its key concerns. They also illustrate historical and cultural reasons for the focus on negotiation and acceptance of different ideas, an important element for understanding the context of WonderCafe, a site that offers space to host many opinions, and allows users to freely express those opinions and negotiate acceptance of ideas and points of view among themselves.

Additionally, the United Church of Canada, much like many other liberal protestant churches in both North American and Europe, has suffered a gradual decline in membership over the past 50 years. Initially, this decline signalled what some referred to as the secularisation of society, which they proposed would eventually lead to the disappearance of religion from society altogether (see Berger 1969; Luckmann 1967; Wilson 1969). This theory has been hotly contested, with some, such as Jose Casanova (1994), arguing that secularisation theories may have some weight; for example, Casanova argues that declining membership in some Christian churches can be understood as the process of differentiation, influenced by the decreases of churches' power in other institutions. However, the situation varies significantly between countries, religions and denominations. Thus, Casanova would argue that it would not only be impossible but also misleading to apply any theory of secularisation as a blanket theory. Other scholars such as Steven Bruce (2002) argue that religion will continue to decline in certain settings because in those settings religion has

become a matter of personal choice. Thus, individuals are able to mix and match their religious beliefs, choosing to reject those that are less appealing and finding institutional religion, where adherents are given certain doctrines that they must believe or practices that must be practiced, far less appealing.

A further theory, offered by Grace Davie (1994), suggests that while many still believe in religious principals and ideas, many do not actively participate in a congregation. She calls this position “believing without belonging.” This idea may explain the high number of Canadians who affiliate with the United Church on census forms and may see themselves as having values similar to that church, but who do not actively attend the church. Unfortunately, space restrictions do not permit a full development of these theories, but one can understand the decline in membership and the WonderCafe campaign in the broader context of debates about secularization and society.

A debate that holds more significance is that around Rational Choice theory promoted by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (2000). Their argument is that the religious groups that do well in modern society are those that create a higher level of tension between their members and society in general. These churches tend to offer a greater reward for members but also expect more adherence to rules and regulations from those members. Thus, low-tension churches, such as the United Church, would fair poorly in the religious market. The idea that religious success can be understood through market theory has also been taken up by Bibby (2004) who applies it to the Canadian situation, arguing that the success of Canadian churches can be determined by how well they tap into the religious interests of Canadians. This theory is important for this thesis as the discourse generated by these theories, particularly the idea that a church can be successful if it simply offers what

potential members are looking for, seems to have been influential in the development of WonderCafe.

1.2.3 *Marketing Religion*

One of the ways to understand the development of the WonderCafe website is to locate it within the idea of marketing religion. As Kevin Kee's (2006) study of revival movements in Canada has shown, the idea that religion is something that can be sold to people through entertainment is not necessarily a new concept. His study shows that revivalists in Canada from 1884-1957 used what could be considered marketing strategies to draw members to churches. Twitchell (2004) also demonstrates the older roots in marketing religious products, and shows that the ways in which religion is marketed have not always been as overt as they are today, when churches increasingly rely on mainstream advertising techniques, including print advertising (62-65). Einstein examined the ways that religion continues to be marketed to people today and its increasing prominence in society (Einstein 2008). Both Einstein (using Saddleback) and Twitchell (using Willowcreek) focus on examples of mega-churches to demonstrate that selling religion to people has morphed into the creation of a brand that can be sold to people as a whole package. This phenomenon extends beyond North America, as the recent collection of papers *Religious Commodification in Asia: Marketing Gods* (Kitiarsa 2008) has illustrated.

1.2.4 *Summary*

This literature is important for the study of WonderCafe in a number of ways. Examinations of internet technology illuminate three significant themes. First, they highlight the technical side of the internet and WonderCafe, illustrating the types of online activities

that can be harnessed by WonderCafe. Second, they demonstrate the potential impact of internet technology on WonderCafe users and on the United Church. Finally, work by Helland (2000) and Dawson (2004) provides filters to better understand the types of activities that happen on WonderCafe.

Literature on religion in Canada offers background to better understand the situation of the United Church in the Canadian context and highlight the shifting nature of religion in Canada today. Research into the history of the United Church, particularly the collaboration and negotiation that went into its formation, provides information about how this Church arrived at its current situation. Recent studies of the United Church also highlight the diversity within the United Church, in terms of sexual, ethnic and religious diversity, and also in terms of diversity of opinions.

Finally, literature related to marketing religion offers insights into the decision by the United Church to work with a mainstream advertising company to develop a strategy to attract new members. This literature locates the United Church within the context of increased advertising of religious products.

1.3 Methodology

The methodology for this thesis includes a combination of content and discourse analysis, as well as the theoretical and methodological approach developed by Kim Knott in her book, *The Location of the Sacred: A Spatial Analysis* (2005), and her subsequent article “From locality and back again: A spatial journey in the study of religion” (2008). The data for this thesis is collected from the United Church’s WonderCafe website. That data was collected over the month of June, 2011, supplemented by frequent visits to the site over the

past two years, including numerous visits to the site since it was launched in November 2006.

1.3.1 *Methods of Analysis*

The data for this project was collected and analysed through a three-pronged approach using content, discourse and Kim Knott's spatial analysis. These methods allow for an examination of the data from several different perspectives. Content analysis examines the specific content present on WonderCafe. Discourse analysis digs below the visible content of WonderCafe and works to determine the underlying meanings and connections within the content. Knott's spatial analysis, which was developed to explore religion in physical space, examines how the space within WonderCafe connects to other spaces both within and outside of WonderCafe and through different points in time, as well as the networks of power underlying the space.

1.3.1.1 Content Analysis

At its most basic level, the data for this project was collected and analysed using content analysis. "Content analysis is a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meaning" (Berg 2009, 338). Data was collected from different parts of the WonderCafe website, and manifest content was recorded, for example usernames of members of the site and numbers of responses to poll questions, as well as latent content, such as conversations with a supportive undertone between members. The units that were collected for content analysis were words, such as "the United Church," and themes, such as parenting, in the images on WonderCafe's mainpage. This thesis uses summative content analysis, which

“starts with identifying and quantifying certain words or content in the text with the purpose of understanding the contextual use of words or contexts” (Hseih and Shannon 2005, 1283), in order to record references to the United Church on WonderCafe.

1.3.1.2 Discourse Analysis

For this study, discourse analysis was used to interpret the collected data. This form of analysis examines the patterns and social context from which the data comes (Berg 2009, 353) and is useful for this thesis because it offers a way to study how words, phrases and images are used on the webpage, and seeks to understand the context from which the text and images come (Gee, 2005). A discourse analysis of WonderCafe examines topics such as what the specific types of activities that users take part in on WonderCafe have to say about what members use WonderCafe for. It is also used to answer questions related to topics such as an identification of the values put forward by images on the main page of WonderCafe. Critical discourse analysis is another aspect of discourse analysis that focuses specifically on power relations behind discourse (van Dijk, 1993). One area where discourse analysis plays an important role is with respect to examining power relations within the United Church on WonderCafe.

1.3.1.3 Spatial Analysis

Kim Knott’s spatial analysis offers a way to examine the space of the WonderCafe website. Her work focuses on how researchers can examine physical space in order to better understand religion, and in *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis* (2005), she explores the spatial analysis of religion in the most expanded way. Knott focuses her analysis on a small object, the left hand, and through this explores the location of religion in social,

cultural and physical space, and demonstrates that the left hand holds different types of religious significance in many different cultural contexts. She follows these linkages to show how religion can be manifested physically within this hand. In her 2009 article “From locality to location and back again,” Knott illustrates how this method can be applied to another location, Chapeltown Road in Leeds, and explores how manifestations of religion on Chapeltown Road exist. This approach moves religion from the abstract and shows the ways that religion is present and visible in physical space. In both of these studies, Knott breaks her analysis into four parts. First, she examines how the body interacts with, inhabits and maintains physical space. In her examination of Chapeltown Road, she explores how the buildings are measured to fit the human form and the ways in which people use the space, whether it be visiting a café or crossing the road. Second, Knott examines the physical, social and mental dimensions of space. In her study of the left hand, Knott examines why people wear wedding rings on their left hand, when the right hand is usually the one put forward in social interactions. She finds that it is because in the past, it was believed that a nerve ran from the ring finger to the heart (139). Third, Knott examines the properties of space, which are configuration, diachronic extensiveness, synchronic interconnections and power relations, all of which is be examined in more detail below. Finally, Knott examines the dynamism of space, how the space is lived and how it is produced and reproduced. For example, she shows how Chapeltown Road is transformed every year by the West Indian carnival in August, which transforms space normally used for mundane activities, such as business or shopping, into a place for music and celebration.

At a time when many interactions have moved to the internet, it is interesting to view internet space through Knott’s theoretical and methodological approaches, and to see that the ways in which people connect online is both similar to, and different from, connections in

physical space. Knott's four properties of space—configuration, extension, simultaneity and power—are particularly useful to this study. The properties of space offer a way to draw links between the space on WonderCafe and space offline, on other websites and within WonderCafe itself.

1.3.1.3.1 Configuration

One space may be interpreted and understood in different ways by the people who interact within it, and may bring together all of the interpretations of a physical space in one place (Knott 2005, 22). This is also described as the ways spaces gather (Knott 2009,156). During the time WonderCafe was examined for this thesis, there were a number of different activities underway, and depending how members used WonderCafe, they could have unique experiences on the website. The different types of spaces that users had created for themselves on WonderCafe, were also examined, specifically a space for spiritual exploration, a space for the United Church, a space for support and a space for friendship.

1.3.1.3.2 Extension

By studying the diachronic extension, one can gain a better understanding of how space changes over time. Knott writes, "Extension conveys the sense of time flowing through space as well as the way in which places contain within them the traces of earlier times and regimes" (2009, 156). The ways in which the official content of WonderCafe changed over time were examined, specifically in terms of the increased visibility of the United Church. The ways in which users change and shape the space on WonderCafe were also examined, focusing on profile pictures and topics in the discussion boards, and user-generated content itself, which at times completely disappears from this site.

1.3.1.3.3 Simultaneity

Simultaneity is the idea one space may link to other spaces at the same time. Knott writes, “But there are also synchronic interconnections with other sites, both those that are similar in kind and those real and imagined co-existing sites to which our place is connected by the movement of people and capital, the flow of communications and ideas” (2009, 156). This property was examined on two levels. The first related to WonderCafe’s hyperlinks to other website and looked at where links went and what this says about the values of the website. The second related to the ways in which users of WonderCafe linked to different events and experiences through their discussions.

1.3.1.3.4 Power

Knott’s final property of space is power. She writes, “Whether through its historical seams, simultaneous interconnections or the struggles that produce it or take place within it, power inhabits space” (2009, 156). Knott argues that power struggles are always played out in space. She writes that “the spaces that religion occupies and participates in are space of power” (2005, 28). This concept is used when examining how the messages on the WonderCafe website reflect a tension over the purpose of WonderCafe, and in exploring whether this is a space for spiritual investigation or a website to promote United Church initiatives. This paper also examines how WonderCafe serves as a space that both challenges United Church authority and reaffirms United Church values.

1.3.2 *Data Collection*

The site of research is wondercafe.ca. In Appendix One, images of the website are provided to give readers a visual idea of what WonderCafe looks like. The data for this

project was collected by systematically going through the WonderCafe website and taking the content from its pages and inputting this onto an Excel spreadsheet.

The first step in this project was to record data from the webpages of WonderCafe. Particularly important were the frames of WonderCafe—those parts of the site on the edges of the screen that remain stable as the user jumps between the content. The content of the frames do not change significantly from one page to another, and some features—for example, the coloured list of links at the top left of the page, never change. It is important to note content that is always present and content that is only sometimes present, and therefore features present on the frames of the main page but not elsewhere were noted, as were those features missing from the main page, but present elsewhere. Equally important is the order of information and the order of links and their prominence; these were examined as a way to determine which links were more important than others. The frames add a sense of consistency between the pages, and therefore noting differences is important.

The next point of analysis related to the content of the pages within the frames. These were copied into the spreadsheet, and any links and where they were directed were noted. Within the content, a scan was made for key words and phrases such as ‘open minded,’ ‘explore,’ ‘religion,’ ‘spirituality,’ ‘United Church,’ ‘discuss,’ and ‘debate.’ The text as whole was also studied for themes such as ‘religion,’ ‘family,’ ‘community,’ ‘regulations,’ and ‘acceptance.’

Some parts of the website required a more structured recording system. These were the parts that, instead of blocks of text, featured other types of information. Seven areas were recorded in this way: the main page image, blogs, groups, poll questions, members, discussion boards and Twitter links.

1.3.2.1 Main Page Images

The image on the main page of the website changes each time the page is reloaded and cycles between ten options, all of which feature pictures of people with a thought-provoking question written across the bottom of the picture. These images are at the centre of the page when one first visits WonderCafe, and are the most immediately visible part of the page. The question and the people in the picture were recorded, as well as their approximate age, gender, ethnicity, and whether they were looking at the viewer. Analysis was then conducted with respect to what these showed to be the most important questions for the website, and who was represented in the pictures.

1.3.2.2 Blogs

The blog page lists the most recent blog posts, with the bloggers whose posts appear on that page listed at the side. The subject matter for these blogs was recorded, as well as who was updating them, in order to get a better idea about the range of topics covered, as blog posts represent what the members of the website thought were important topics to discuss.

1.3.2.3 Groups

The groups page on WonderCafe provides a space for members to create a group where they can post images, discuss topics and let each other know about events. All groups were recorded and coded for the number of members, number of posts on the group wall and theme. These themes included areas such as photography, congregations and book clubs. Recording the groups provided a sense of the topics that the members of WonderCafe wanted to create space to discuss in more detail. By recording the number of members and

the number of posts, information was gained about the degree to which the groups resonated with other members of the site.

1.3.2.4 Poll Questions

WonderCafe keeps a list of all poll questions that have appeared on the website since it started to ask poll questions. The poll question changes weekly and the topic is usually tied in with current events at the time. The questions, options, number of people voting and number of people discussing the poll topic were all recorded. This served as a way to note the themes that WonderCafe administrators were raising within the community, and also indicated which topic resonated most with users and provoked most discussion.

1.3.2.5 Members

WonderCafe had more than 15,250 members as of June 23, 2011. While it might have been interesting to track all members of this website in order to make general observations about age, gender and involvement with the United Church, on a site this large, a fair number of members are not active on a regular basis. Instead, a sample of members was selected to reflect those more actively involved in the site. This was possible through the member lists, which can be sorted by most recent activity on the site, with someone who has logged in a few minutes ago listed higher than someone who has not been on the site in three years. Through this, a sample of 200 members was collected. Users and visitors to the site can track the involvement of each member by clicking an icon on the member's profile, which lists discussion threads, blog posts, and group postings in which they have participated. Unfortunately, these activities are electronically sorted in terms of the most

recent activity to that thread rather than by the user themselves. Furthermore, a lot of activity on the site is not necessarily visible. Members can send private messages, or “wondermails” to each other and there is no way to measure lurking—the involvement of those internet users who simply read page content, but do not participate.

All users have a publicly accessible profile pages. Information available in all profiles was recorded, including country, age (divided into five ranges), gender (although a few users choose not to disclose) and number of years as a member of the site. Many members also listed their occupation, which was also recorded. The decision to represent themselves by personalized icons, versus the default brown silhouette was coded, and the religious affiliation of those members who made comments about their religious background was also noted.

1.3.2.6 Discussion Boards

The discussion boards are made up of nine separate categories, called “forums.” Each forum hosts discussions started by a member of the website, which are called “topics.” The first page was recorded—twenty five topics—for each discussion board. On a very active forum, such as the religion and spirituality page, the last topic listed is only about two weeks old, whereas on less popular forums, such as the Global Issues page, the last topic listed is several months old. The name of the topic, the topic starter, the number of replies and the most recent post were noted, and coding was entered to indicate the topic of the discussion, whether the topic has United Church content and the atmosphere of the topic, that is, whether the conversations were friendly or tense.

1.3.2.6 Twitter Feed

The WonderCafe Twitter feed is updated several times a day with links to news articles, websites, United Church initiatives and WonderCafe discussions and blogs. All Tweets over a one-month period were recorded on two separate lists. The first list noted tweets that directed followers back to the WonderCafe website, and included the name of the member whose thread or blog post had been highlighted, the number of times it was mentioned, and, in the case of discussion posts, the forum of the discussion boards where the thread was posted. Coding was entered for the topic of the post, whether the member who posted the comment was a United Church member and whether the post mentioned the United Church. The second list recorded Tweets that did not link back to WonderCafe. This noted the part of the website the posts came from and the number of times the particular link was posted. Coding indicated the topic of the post, whether it was about the United Church, whether the post was about a religious group, and what religious leaning that group had. Finally, posts were categorized into themes, such as books, homosexuality and politics.

1.3.3 *Conclusion*

The use of content and discourse analysis enabled a systematic study of the interests and voices of users on WonderCafe, both within and outside the United Church. Knott's theoretical and methodological insights provide approaches to thinking about internet space in unique ways, as both similar to and different from physical space. Knott's spatial analysis provides a way of examining the dynamic nature of internet space, especially in relation to connections to different spaces, power relations and points in time. Before explaining the results of this data analysis, this thesis moves into a discussion of the forces that shaped the creation of WonderCafe, which is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Two: The Creation of WonderCafe

In 2006, the United Church of Canada launched WonderCafe as part of its Emerging Spirit Campaign, an initiative designed to bring new members to the Church. WonderCafe was advertised as a place for users to become engaged in spiritual and moral topics with others who had similar interests, and the interactive website offered space to become involved in conversations through discussion boards, and to share thoughts through personal blogs. While advertisements for the website acknowledged the United Church, they also pitched WonderCafe as an open-minded place for anyone to join. There would appear to be somewhat of a disconnect between this promotional message of inclusion, and the Church's official message that this website was part of a campaign to attract new members. To better understand this apparent conflict about the intended role of WonderCafe, this chapter examines the route that led to its development. This chapter seeks to answer questions about the external and internal factors that lead to the creation of WonderCafe.

This exploration begins with a brief discussion of the history of the United Church, which offers a context within which to understand the creation of WonderCafe, focusing on the tradition of negotiation and acceptance within the Church. It then moves on to a discussion of the declining membership, which is key to understanding the ways in which the Church has used internet technology.

The next section examines the external forces that contributed to the development of the WonderCafe website, beginning with the prominence of marketing religion to people through mainstream advertising techniques. The increased marketing of religion may be influenced by academic theorists who argue that one can understand the success of different religious groups by examining them through a model of supply and demand. This chapter then considers the development of Web 2.0 technology, which led to highly interactive

internet sites that allow users to respond to, reflect on and shape the content that they encounter.

The final section of this chapter examines the creation of WonderCafe itself, focusing on the Emerging Spirit campaign from which this website emerged. Following this, it moves into a discussion of how WonderCafe was formed and how the website was launched to the public.

2.1 The United Church before WonderCafe

In order to understand WonderCafe, one must first understand the context from which it came within the United Church. To do so, three influences are examined: the history of negotiation and acceptance within the United Church, its declining membership and the past relationship between the United Church and technology.

2.1.1 A brief history of the United Church of Canada

Themes of negotiation and acceptance flow through the history of the United Church of Canada. This church was not a transplant from the British Isles or from France, but instead, is a church that was developed on Canadian soil as the result of the official merger in 1925 of Methodist, Congregationalist and 70% of Presbyterian churches in Canada.⁴ From the beginning of its history, negotiation and compromise were needed for it to exist. The official merger of its founding denominations was predated by a merger of these churches in western Canada, which formed the General Council of Union Churches. This General Council came together to reflect the reality of what was happening in congregations that

⁴ The churches that would later make up the United Church of Canada had already gone through the process of negotiation to form national Canadian churches within their own organizations, the Presbyterians in 1875, the Methodists in 1884 and the Congregationalists in 1906 (Grant 1967, 18).

were spread far apart on the Canadian prairies. Members of these churches could not always make their way to the church with which they were formally affiliated and, instead, would attend the church that most closely reflected their values. These regional churches had enough problems of their own financing buildings, finding ministers and attracting congregants without dealing with competition from similar churches (Ng 2008). Grant (1967) argues that in addition to these practical concerns, another motivation was the patriotism among Canadians and the desire to create a national Canadian Church (28). The first official Union Church was formed in 1908 in Saskatchewan. More churches followed and in 1912 the General Council of Union Churches was created in order to form an administrative system for managing activities (United Church 2010b).

The merger in 1925 to officially create the United Church across Canada required negotiation from all sides to reach a deal, as it was important for these three churches, which had already established an understanding of their individual structural, administrative and theological workings, not to compromise values and practices that they felt best reflected their moral and spiritual worldviews. Silcox (1933) writes “the agitation for organic church union in Canada across denominational lines was almost continuous for fifty years before 1902, when it entered into the stage of actual negotiations” (103). The first talks related to potential mergers began in 1886 and were actually started by the Anglican Church of Canada.⁵ The negotiations between the churches that would make up the United Church began in 1902 and took 23 years to complete and would result in the first church union across denominational lines (United Church 2010b). Five years later, in 1930, the Wesleyan

⁵ While the Anglican Church has not entered into union with the United Church, discussions on the subject have taken place a number of times in church history and while the churches continue to accept the validity of each other, talks of merger appear to have fizzled out on the 1960s (United Church 2011) and officially ended in 1985 (United Church 2010b).

Methodist Church of Bermuda joined the United Church and in 1966 the Evangelical United Brethren Church also merged with it.

Reflections of its foundational churches can be seen throughout the United Church. Grant (1967) writes that “it appears that the chief concern of the framers was to include as much Presbyterianism, Methodism and Congregationalism as they conscientiously could” (33). Following the union of the churches, the new United Church also had to negotiate the practical features of ministry, such as deciding what accommodations would be provided for ministers and harmonising the pension plans (Grant 1967, 57).

At the most basic level, the double barrelled or hyphenated names of churches reflect the merger, for example St. Andrew’s Wesley in Vancouver and Knox-Metropolitan in Regina. The crest of the United Church has symbols of the three uniting churches: an open book to represent the Congregationalist churches, a dove to represent the Methodist churches and a burning bush to represent the Presbyterian churches (United Church 2010c). The organisational structure of the Church is also a product of the forming churches. The smallest groupings are terms and structures taken from the Congregationalists: congregations and pastoral charges, the latter of which are two or more nearby, usually small, congregations that share financial resources (Ng 2008, 206). There are 2,250 pastoral charges within the Church (United Church 2010d). At the next level in organisational structure are Presbyteries, of which there are 90 (United Church 2010d). Presbyteries, stemming from the Presbyterian influence, oversee a geographical region and are responsible for overseeing ministries and discipline when necessary (Ng 2008, 206). At the largest level of organisation are Conferences. With their roots in Methodism, these are responsible for screening and ordaining ministers (Ng 2008, 206). There are 13 Conferences in Canada, which are divided along geographical lines (United Church 2010d). Doctrinally, when this Church came

together, all parties affirmed the Reformation heritage of each of the merging denominations and the importance of the Bible in their faith (Ng, 2007). The head of the United Church is called the moderator, who is elected at United Church general conferences, which take place every three years. The current moderator is Mardi Tindal, who was elected in 2009 (United Church, 2010g).

As the United Church established itself among the churches of Canada, it became known for its liberal stance towards social issues—something that continues to be one of the Church's defining features. Commitment to social justice is singled out as one of its core beliefs alongside the Bible and communion. The Church describes its commitment to social justice in this way:

Caring for one another was central to Jesus' teachings: Feed the hungry, satisfy the thirsty, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit those in prison.

We believe we strengthen one another to work, through God's grace, for a better world. To this end, we cooperate with other churches, faith traditions, and people of goodwill to eliminate poverty and protect those who are most vulnerable. (United Church of Canada 2010e).

The social justice section of the United Church website links to twenty two social justice campaigns, from combatting climate change and exploring the ethical implications of biotechnology, to campaigning for aboriginal rights and protesting against gambling. Within each of the twenty-two campaigns, there are many smaller sub-campaigns (United Church 2010h). This means that the United Church's interests extend beyond the otherworldly into day-to-day life and experience. Its social justice campaigns also put the Church into issues that do not necessarily involve Christians, resulting in frequent work with people of other religious worldviews.

Additionally, despite its commitment to social justice today, including aboriginal justice, the Church was formerly involved in residential schools, both as the United Church itself and within its founding denominations. While the people working with aboriginal Canadians at that time likely felt that they were doing ‘God’s work,’ their efforts had a great impact on the identities of aboriginal people who were taken from their communities and taught ‘European’ and ‘Christian’ values (Smith 1986). In 1994, the Church established a Healing Fund to address the impact of residential schools on aboriginal people; that fund raised \$1.2 million (Ng 2008, 237; United Church 2010f). In 1998, the United Church offered an official apology to First Nations communities related to their involvement in residential schools (United Church 2011). The United Church has also been involved with the Canadian Government in the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which was reached in 2006. The Church agreed to contribute \$6.89 million (Ng, 236). In 2009, 6% (\$2,608,083) of the United Church’s operating budget went towards “healing and building right relations with Aboriginal peoples” (United Church 2009a, 6), a sizeable financial contribution.

The United Church has also become known for its progressive stance towards gender and sexuality. It became the first major denomination in Canada to ordain women when Rev. Lydia Gruchy was ordained in 1936 (Calhoun 2006). In 1980, the Church elected its first female moderator, Lois Mirriam Wilson (Grant 2011). This progressive position has required negotiation within the Church. In 1984, the Church also pledged that it would work to end discrimination against gays and lesbians (Young 2006, 14). In 1988, the General Assembly of the United Church of Canada affirmed that all members should be eligible for ordination regardless of their sexual orientation. A quarter of representatives voted against this decision, which caused major divisions within the Church. At that time, some members chose to leave

in protest. However, many others who also disagreed with this position chose to stay and banded together to form the “Community of Concern,”⁶ to challenge the decision. The Community of Concern continues to be part of the United Church today (Nedelsky and Hutchinson 2009, 44; O’Toole, *et. al.* 1993, 274, 284). Further, adding to the emphasis on compromise, congregations were given considerable power on an individual level in order to decide whether they would accept LGBT ministers (Hanomansing 1988). In 2003, the General Council of the United Church decided in favour of same-sex marriages within their church, and again, the decision of whether or not a church would perform same-sex marriage was left in the hands of individual congregations (Nedelsky and Hutchinson 2008, 45).⁷ The United Church also stood on the side of same-sex marriage in legal negotiations around the country over the legalisation of same-sex marriage, and testified to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights in 2003 (Young 2010). What these negotiations indicate is that the United Church has been able to exist as a unified religious community, even though there continues to be tensions over the acceptance of homosexuality within the Church.

The United Church commitment to social justice is a key part of its theological position, along with two other areas highlighted by the United Church: inclusiveness and multi-faith relations. In explaining its concern for all people, whether members or not, the church writes:

Jesus welcomed everyone, whether they were poor, rich, or just getting by; ill or healthy; self-made or educated; popular or a loner; secure or full of doubts.

⁶ The “Community of Concern” continues to exist. Members continue to be part of the United Church. Their first objective, for example, is “To pursue a positive and healing ministry throughout the United Church, working together to resolve our concerns and encouraging members to remain within the Church” (Community of Concern 2011).

⁷ For a detailed discussion about the United Church’s position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage see Young 2006, 2008.

The United Church of Canada prides itself on welcoming everyone the way Jesus did, regardless of age, race, class, gender, orientation, or physical ability. (United Church. 2010e)

By placing inclusiveness as a core belief of the United Church, and especially by highlighting orientation, the United Church is differentiating itself from many other Christians churches, and also the predominate representation of Christian churches in the media. This puts the United Church in the position of opening its doors to all varieties of people, while also closing those doors to many Christians who would find this inclusiveness unchristian. This openness to inclusiveness becomes a major theme on the WonderCafe website.

A commitment to multi-faith relations has also influenced the creation of the WonderCafe website, as the United Church prides itself on its ability to work with people from other religious institutions. The church explains the importance of multi-faith relations in this statement:

The United Church of Canada views the religious practice of all people of goodwill with respect and gratitude. We believe the Spirit of God is at work in many different faith communities.

For Christians, Jesus is the way we know God. Our understanding is nonetheless limited by human imagination. God is greater still and works in our world by a mysterious Spirit that knows no distinction at the doorway of a Christian chapel; Buddhist, Hindu, or Sikh temple; Aboriginal sweat lodge, Muslim mosque, or Jewish synagogue.

We work together with other Christian churches whenever possible, and among people of other religions in Canada and throughout the world on matters of justice, peace, and human dignity.

Today, difference is everywhere around us and, we believe, a great cause for celebration. (United Church 2010e)

Thus, the United Church underlines that not only does it not see itself as the only path to salvation, it sees working with other churches as an essential piece of its theological outlook.

The development of WonderCafe fits within the context of this overarching willingness to communicate and collaborate, as it hosts and encourages multi-faith discussions.

The emphasis within United Church theology on social justice, inclusiveness and multi faith relations means that, in many ways, the church sees its community as extending beyond United Church members and congregations. It imagines the Church's role as moving into the community, which may explain why the Church has been so actively involved in a number of controversial social justice issues. One key example is the Church's early involvement in campaigns to legalise birth control. As early as 1932, only seven years after its formation, the United Church noted that while procreation was a key goal within marriage, in some cases contraceptives could be appropriate (Trothen 2000, 328). In 1936, the church came out in favour of contraceptives more strongly, writing that contraceptives could be used to lower infant mortality rates, protect mothers' health and strengthen family life (Trothen 2000, 329). The United Church Moderator Mardi Tindal writes in a blog post that:

As early as 1936, we supported a woman named Dorothea Palmer who was arrested in Ottawa for distributing birth control information to a mother of nine living in poverty. The United Church of Canada provided a witness in her trial, the Rev. John Coburn, who informed the court that the church's 1936 General Council had adopted a resolution counseling that contraception be a matter of individual conscience. Dorothea Palmer was eventually acquitted on all charges (Tindal 2011).

A further example of taking part in wider Canadian social discourse is the United Church's role in lobbying the Canadian federal government in 1980 to decriminalize abortion within the first 20 weeks of pregnancy. The church saw abortion as the lesser of two evils: ending a life was evil, yet the church argued that if a woman's well-being was at stake, abortion may be justified (Trothen 2000, 336).

Thus, from early within United Church history, the ideals of social justice, inclusiveness, and multi-faith relations meant that the Church's community reached beyond its members. The United Church became involved in campaigns that it believed would better help this extended community, even if this meant that, at times, it found itself involved in controversial issues. This helps to set the context for why the church, already familiar with being at the center of controversy, found it acceptable to feature a print campaign that highlights sex and homosexuality as entry points into WonderCafe. Moreover, the emphasis on this broader community makes a website like WonderCafe, which is available to all people, the kind of project that the United Church might be expected to embrace. Additionally, the church's emphasis on community work -- with no emphasis on recruiting those helped to become new church members -- also makes the continued use of WonderCafe within the United Church -- even if it is not attracting many new members to the church -- an activity that fits within its theological outlook.

2.1.2 A Canadian Church in Decline

The United Church has mirrored many other Canadian denominations in its gradual decline in membership and attendance over the past 50 years. The membership within the United Church is almost half what it was at its peak, with 525,673 members in 2008 (United Church 2009b), compared to 1,062,000 in 1966 (Bibby 2004a, 22). Census records show further aspects of this decline. The 2001 Canadian Census revealed that 2,839,125 Canadians considered themselves sufficiently affiliated with the United Church to fill it in as their religion on their census form, a decrease of 8.2% from the 1991 Census (Statistics Canada 2003, 18). This means that only about one-fifth of Canadians who identify as belonging to the United Church are actually active enough to be counted as members by the Church. The

picture is even bleaker when one considers that the average weekly attendance of the church nationwide is 193,512 people (United Church 2009b). These low rates of attendance are coupled with a high median age for people who affiliate with the church on the census. The median age of the United Church is 44, seven years older than the median age of all Canadians, 37, which places it as the second oldest denomination after the Presbyterian Church, whose median age is 46 (Statistics Canada 2003, 19). Further, the United Church will not benefit from immigration as much as some other denominations may because the United Church is not a global church, such as the Anglican Church (Ng 2008, 222). Canadians who affiliate but do not attend may, in fact, hold the United Church as a close part of their identity, but they may also take part in other religious or spiritual practices, such as meditation or yoga. This population, however, does not contribute to it financially (Berger, Davie and Fokas, 2008; Davie 1994; McGuire 2008).

2.1.3 *Tech-Savvy Church*

The history of the United Church and technology is not a new one. The United Church website was launched in 1996 (United Church 2003, 3). Additionally, many individual United Churches have their own webpages with information about service times and links to pdfs of church newsletters and bulletins, and the Church offers a detailed guide to congregations interested in developing their own websites (United Church of Canada 2010). The history of the United Church and web technology, however, is much older and really begins in 1984 with the development of UCHUG (United Church Computer Users Group) on an early electronic mailing system. The network founder, David M. Lochhead, wrote in 1986

Pastors from the Atlantic to the Pacific can discuss, on a weekly basis, the common texts that will be used as scripture readings on the following Sunday. We are also using UCHUG for a denomination-wide discussion of one of the most divisive issues currently facing the United Church: the ordination of homosexuals. (Lochhead 1986)

Lochhead adds that this then-new technology would change patterns of communication:

In a denomination such as the United Church of Canada, computer conferencing can radically change established patterns of communication. Traditionally, the flow of information has been from the local churches to the central office, and then from the central office back out to the local churches. With computer conferencing, the central office tends to be bypassed as an information clearinghouse; information flows across the organization. (Lochhead 1986)

Helland (in press) argues that in its ventures with the early internet, the United Church experienced the different types of potential the internet has to connect members. On the one hand, users could take part in discussions about issues at the grassroots level, while on the other, the technology could also be used to disseminate ideas and information from the moderator or Church officials quickly and across the country.

In 1986, Lochhead created a closed communications system called ECUNET. This system encouraged communication about religious issues across denominational lines, and included Catholics, Mennonites and Southern Baptists (Helland in press). This use of technology not only connected United Church members, but also connected members with people of other denominations, and shows the United Church's openness to new technology and to dialogue with those who are not its members. Heidi Campbell (2009) argues that understanding a religious community's past involvement with technology is important for understanding its current use of technology. Thus, it is important that the United Church was an early adopter of internet technology in the past.

2.1.4 *Summary*

Before the launch of WonderCafe, there were three underlying features within the United Church that would encourage the creation of such a website. The first is that throughout its history, there has been an openness to new ideas and negotiation. This is evident in the merger of the uniting churches to form the United Church. Further, the Church's commitment to social justice issues shows an openness to working with groups of people who may not necessarily be members, and an interest in this-worldly issues. Finally, the tensions resulting from the United Church's decisions regarding homosexuality and the fact that members are free to dissent from within the Church shows that the United Church accepts a level of disagreement among members. These examples illustrate why a space like WonderCafe, which encourages spiritual dialogue, would be an acceptable United-Church-hosted website. Further, the United Church has been losing members over the past 50 years; if they want to attract new members, they will need to think of creative strategies. The United Church's ongoing use of internet technology means that most members would be comfortable with a website such as WonderCafe. Finally, the creation of WonderCafe can, in fact, be seen as a continuation of their use of internet technology for dialogue.

2.2 Increase of Marketing Religion

A key ingredient in the stew that simmered to create the United Church WonderCafe website is the increase of marketing religion in general. Selling religion to people as a product is hardly a new invention; one need only look at the revivalist movements of the late 19th and early 20th Century to see this at work in the spectacles designed to draw people to preachers (Kee 2006).

In more recent years, theorists such as Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (2000) have popularised the idea that the success of a religious group can be understood by using market theory. This theory suggests that one must look at the supply from the church and the demand of the congregants to understand how to make a church competitive on this market. While theories that examine the success of religious groups in this way have been widely critiqued,⁸ they have had an impact on the ways that people understand religion as a commodity and have helped make room for discussions about how religion can be sold to people.

Reginald W. Bibby in his book *Restless Gods* (2004a), for example, posits the theory that Canadians are hungry for spirituality. To succeed, churches simply need to tap into people's desires.⁹ He writes that

The groups that thrive will be groups that are in touch with the spiritual, personal, and social needs and interests of Canadians. We've seen what people say they want; I would venture to say congregations that are flourishing are doing a good job at ministering to all three areas. (234).

Bibby's follow-up book, *Restless Churches* (2004b), offers a guide for churches about ways to tap into this desire for religion among Canadians. He offers sections on what churches need to do, who can do it and how to find affiliates.

The idea that religious success depends on providing religiously interested people with the type of religious product that they will be most interested in is perhaps one of the reasons that religion is treated like a commodity that can be sold to people. Einstein (2008) writes that churches create "faith brands", which are used as packages to sell religion. Einstein argues that religious institutions create these "faith brands" for a variety of reasons:

⁸ See for example Chaves and Gorski 2001.

⁹ For a critique of Bibby's work see Thiessen and Dawson 2008.

(1) religion must compete against other discretionary leisure activities; (2) religion must compete against the constant barrage of images and information in today's culture; and (3) teens and 20-30-somethings are not attached to religion as their counterparts in previous generations" (193).

Creating a brand for a church and actively marketing it to people using advertising techniques traditionally associated with secular products is one way to grab people's attention. An example of a faith brand is Rick Warren's Saddleback Church, which has an average attendance of almost 20,000 members a week, making it the eighth largest church in the United States in 2008 (Outreach Magazine 2008). Warren is notable, because in addition to his highly successful congregation, after several years of offering seminars to clergy on the subject, in 1995 he published *A Purpose Driven Church*, which could be used as a guide to churches on how to be more appealing to potential members (Einstein 2008, 96-97). Warren now estimates that more than 200,000 church leaders have been trained in his philosophy (Saddleback 2011). Building on the success of his first book, he wrote a follow up for lay people called *A Purpose Driven Life*. This book offered a 40-day guide to readers to bring them closer to God, and had 500,000 copies in its first print run (Einstein 2008, 98).

Perhaps because of the success of promoters like Rick Warren, an increasing market has developed for people who bill themselves as church consultants, who are hired—sometimes for as much as \$250 an hour—to develop strategies for congregations to appeal to potential congregants. In 2005, there were an estimated 5,000 such consultants working in America (Einstein 2008, 60-61).

Two important concepts are at play here. First, there is the idea that the success and failure of a religious tradition can be understood within a market context, meaning that churches that fail are not providing the services that potential congregants need. Second, there is the increase in the marketing of religious products, which suggests that if potential

congregants cannot find a church on their own, churches can reach out to them in ways that were in the past associated with secular products. This is the context within which the United Church, with its declining membership, found itself. With the WonderCafe campaign, the United Church sought to attract potential members through advertising.

The idea that the success of a church can be helped by openly marketing to people is something that many within the United Church clearly seemed to believe. In some ways it seems that people within the United Church read works by writers such as Bibby (2004a, 2004b) and decided that if they could figure out what Canadians wanted and offered it to them, their church would be more successful.

2.3 Web 2.0 Technology

The development of internet technology has been explored in the previous chapter. In this chapter however, it is important to note the influence of Web 2.0 technology as it specifically relates to the development of WonderCafe. Web 2.0, a term for increasingly interactive and user-centric internet products, was coined in 2004 by Tim O'Reilly of O'Reilly Media, a company that publishes books and guides about technology. In many ways this technology changed the ways that people use the internet. Rather than simply presenting information for people to read, Web 2.0 websites were interactive and user-driven. Users found themselves at the centre of their own online experiences. Their web activities were about their opinions, their presence and what they were doing. People were not expected to be passive recipients of information. Users could give their assessments of news stories, rate products that they had bought online, and create blogs that were devoted to their own interests (Thomas and Sheth 2011, 1285-1286). Websites, such as Facebook, put the user in the centre of the experience and served as portals to interact with other websites. Such

websites allowed users to record their activities and opinions so that online friends could see what they were up to. Key within this is the user's creative, collaborative adoption and use of internet technology (Lim and Palacios-Marques 2011, 124-125).

Nicolette Corrocher identifies three main components of Web 2.0 technology. These are video-sharing applications, such as YouTube; social bookmarking websites, where users can share interesting sites with one another; and social networking. Social networking is the most important form of Web 2.0 technology in terms of this thesis, because WonderCafe is an example of a social networking website. Corrocher explains that social networking

services aim to create social networks for communities of people (often friends) who share interests and activities. Most social networking services allow the users to interact in various ways, by chat, messaging, email, file sharing, blogging, and discussion groups. In addition to Internet-based social networking, mobile phone manufacturers are getting into the social networking business with phones that allow users to create lists of friends and associates, track their movements even across countries, and create customized maps and alerts that signal the user when a desired person is within a predetermined range. (Corrocher 2011, 550).

WonderCafe allows users to send each other emails, or 'wondermails', create a blog and take part in discussion boards.

As has been discussed earlier, the United Church has not been averse to experimenting with new technologies, and in fact, United Church members were early adopters of internet technology. It should not be surprising that they would look to new technologies when developing their own website. Without the increasing popularity of Web 2.0 technology, WonderCafe, in its interactive user-focused form, could not have developed. How the United Church makes use of this technology on WonderCafe is developed in the following chapters.

2.4 Combatting Decline

Perhaps the decline in membership in the United Church will slow and a core group of devoted members will remain, as Bibby suggests (2004, 233). Regardless, the United Church itself does not appear to want to take any chances, based on its development of the Emerging Spirit campaign in 2005, led by United Church minister Keith Howard.¹⁰ The campaign was reported as costing the church \$10.5 million over three years (Retson 2006). This campaign aimed at reengaging or introducing 30-45 year old Canadians to the United Church (Emerging Spirit 2007a). The campaign is explained on their website in this way:

Many United Church of Canada people can remember when the voices of children and young people filled our halls.

What happened to those children and grandchildren?

Why do so many no longer seem to find a home within The United Church of Canada?

Research commissioned by Emerging Spirit shows that many people between the ages of 30 and 45 simply do not know of the existence of The United Church of Canada, much less what beliefs and actions mark the church.

Others lump The United Church of Canada in with broad stereotypes of religion gained from television, movies, and the news and view us as judgmental, not willing to listen, arrogant, and if nothing else, boring.

At the same time, interest in the larger culture about matters of the faith and the spirit are high. The research shows that many seek opportunities for exploration, conversation, community, and a place where they might be able to live out their values in a way that makes a difference.

Emerging Spirit is an initiative of The United Church of Canada working to nurture relationship with those who do not already have a faith community. The campaign focuses on 30-45 year olds as the absence of this generation is profoundly notable.

This campaign aimed to show these people that Church was not boring, rule or guilt oriented but open, family friendly and fun. The emerging spirit campaign has

¹⁰ The Emerging Spirit campaign came to an end on December 31, 2010. The WonderCafe website will continue on its own (United Church 2011b).

launched a number of programs, one of which is the WonderCafe website. (Emerging Spirit 2007b)

The Emerging Spirit campaign was a multi-pronged campaign that worked with congregations to develop new initiatives to attract members. The WonderCafe website was a key component. It should be noted that the Emerging Spirit materials, much like Bibby (2004a), argue that Canadians were spiritual and interested in faith, but this community was not using churches as a way to channel this interest. Again, similar to Bibby, the Emerging Spirit campaign hoped that they could tap into this interest.

The WonderCafe website was launched through the Emerging Spirit Campaign. The Church worked closely on this with Smith Roberts, a mainstream Canadian advertising corporation responsible for campaigns with CanWest, Sky Vodka and Blockbuster Video. The United Church hoped to create a campaign similar to the earlier United Church of Christ campaign that aired on television in the United States (General Council 2009, 788). To prepare for that advertising campaign, the Church hired Environics Research to determine the most effective direction. The research team asked Canadians about their attitudes towards, and opinions about, religion in general and the United Church specifically. One important finding was that 73% of Canadian agreed, “Organized religion tells you what you have to believe.” The research team suggested that “the United Church of Canada must establish its own unique positioning, promote its own values and help people break damaging stereotypes of organized religion” (Waldie 2006). Smith Roberts and Company writes about the campaign:

The agency was faced with the daunting task of turning around the fortunes of a denomination that was becoming increasingly irrelevant to Canadians. Compounding that challenge was research warning us that overt ‘religious recruitment’ messaging would be resoundingly rejected. So our problem was this: How to draw new members to the benefits of The United Church without directly marketing it. Our solution:

develop an online community, WonderCafe.ca, that celebrates the very things for which The United Church of Canada stands, including open-minded, non-judgmental, spiritual exploration. (Smith Roberts, “Campaign Launch”).

The Emerging Spirit campaign website offers a similar description of the project:

WonderCafe is a daring effort to reach out to Canadians who don't attend church in new and exciting ways. It's an advertising campaign for The United Church of Canada, but it's more than that. The WonderCafe campaign isn't just "selling" the denomination. It's creating a new context for Canadians to talk about spirituality and faith.

The challenge of a church advertising campaign in the postmodern Canadian context is to transcend the many barriers Canadians have erected against "organized religion" without overtly "recruiting" them. In order to do this, it is important that the United Church offer these people something that allows them to begin to build a relationship with us on their terms—rather than making them feel pressured to walk through our doors.

We have to offer them a place to take the first step in a deeper exploration of their faith and life issues. This place would have to empower them, put them in control rather than asking them to surrender it; be relevant to their lifestyle and their contemporary mindset; reflect key qualities and values of The United Church of Canada, including open-mindedness and freedom of expression.

It must be a place they can call their own, a place where they can freely express themselves and explore the issues that excite them and the concerns that weigh upon them on their own terms. (Emerging Spirit 2007c).

Both WonderCafe and Smith Roberts recognized the difficult task that they are faced with, in balancing Canadians' distrust of religion in general with the desire within the United Church to attract members. At the press conference launching the campaign, Keith Howard said that it was not aimed at converting people to Christianity, but instead, aimed at people who already considered themselves Christians (Waldie 2006). WonderCafe offered a unique solution to negotiating this difficult balance, in that it allowed users to discuss religion and spirituality in a space hosted by the United Church of Canada, but one that was not dominated by the United Church.

The decision to conduct market research before launching their campaign is an interesting decision in that it shows that some people within the United Church believed, much like Bibby, that to reinvigorate interest in the Church they simply had to tap into the spiritual interests of Canadians. In their market research they were able to get a sense of what Canadians were interested in and also repelled by with respect to religion.

The WonderCafe campaign had three main elements: the WonderCafe website, an advertising campaign throughout national news media to attract Canadians to WonderCafe and the EZ Answer Squirrel viral videos. The WonderCafe campaign was launched November 7th, 2006, with a press conference about the campaign. The story was picked up by news outlets nation-wide, and scored a front-page story with prominent pictures in the *Globe and Mail* (Waldie 2006).

The campaign featured a set of six advertisements, printed in magazines across the country. These advertisements asked provocative questions. One features a Bible with coloured tabs sticking out from the book. The tabs indicate whether the owner agrees or disagrees with the tabbed section. The caption reads: “Want to explore spirituality with someone as open-minded as you?” Another shows an image of the inside of a fridge door with a bottle of whipped cream in the center. The text on the image next to the whipped cream reads: “How much fun can sex be before it’s a sin?” The caption continues: “Moral issues, spiritual topics, life’s big questions – they’re all up for discussion at [WonderCafe]” (WonderCafe 2009). These advertisements asked religious questions in a sleek and edgy way that many viewers may not have associated with any church. By directing people, not to the United Church, but to WonderCafe, they offered viewers a space to explore spiritual questions without needing to commit to an individual church. In this way, the United Church

could be seen as tapping into the spiritual interests of Canadians, without pushing religion too strongly.

The campaign also launched a YouTube video of the EZ Answer Squirrel, which received 2,350,983 views within three years after it was launched (United Church 2009c, 789). The video showed people asking questions of the squirrel, such as a young woman who asked, “Does God hate me because I’m gay?” Without any hesitation, EZ selected the “no” nut. Later in the video a man playing basketball asks “which one of the gospels do you think resonates most in relation to the modern world in which we live?” The squirrel selects “yes” as the answer. When the man looks confused, the video fades and text appears that reads: “Looking for easy answers to life’s big questions? Ask the squirrel. Looking to explore a little deeper? WonderCafe.ca” (WonderCafe 2006). The website has since launched an EZ Answer Squirrel app for the iPhone (iTunes 2010). The EZ Answer Squirrel appeals to viewers through its lighthearted approach, which suggests that WonderCafe does not take itself too seriously, and therefore, users should not feel pressured there. It pitches WonderCafe as a place where people can find answers to spiritual questions, and wrapped within the ad is also an implicit statement about the religious acceptance of gay and lesbian couples, as EZ chooses the nut that indicates that God does not hate people because they are gay. Thus, while encouraging spiritual discussions, WonderCafe firmly locates itself on the liberal side of Christianity.

2.5 Conclusion

The United Church WonderCafe website came about because the United Church was looking for creative strategies to attract members. It was the result of the convergence of several important factors. First, the United Church has highlighted the value of negotiation

and acceptance throughout its history, with the result that this church would feel comfortable hosting a webpage that was open to discussion about different spiritual explorations. Second, the United Church already had a history of more than twenty-two years with internet technology before the site was created, meaning that the church was comfortable with new technology. Third, the use of mainstream advertising techniques has become accepted for religious institutions. Finally, the buzz about the potential of Web 2.0 technology contributed to the acceptance of this type of web experience for and by users.

While WonderCafe took off in the direction of spiritual exploration, the Emerging Spirit campaign continued to focus on bringing people to United Church congregations. The ads Smith Roberts produced increasingly focused on messages related to accepting all types of people within congregations, the United Church being a family-friendly place and the United Church not being focused on guilt or sin (Emerging Spirit 2009a). When the funding for the Emerging Spirit campaign came to an end in 2009, that also ended the relationship between WonderCafe and Smith Roberts. At that time, the United Church 40th General conference elected to continue the Emerging Spirit campaign for one further year and to create congregational training events out of the knowledge gained from the program (United Church 2009c, 806). It was also decided that WonderCafe should continue to exist. Writings at the 40th General Council were very supportive of WonderCafe and impressed with its success. A report to the general council read:

WonderCafe achieved some intriguing results: site traffic is equal to the whole united-church.ca site, despite a much shorter history; there is a higher level of engagement as measured by number of page views and time spent on the site, and there are some indications of success by WonderCafe in attracting its target age demographic. (General Council 2009, 803).

Thus, the Emerging Spirit website came to an end in December, 2010, while WonderCafe continued to exist independently.

Chapter Three: Revealing Tensions Online:

Representations of the United Church on WonderCafe

The creation of WonderCafe grew out of a difficult time for the United Church of Canada. By the decade between the 1991 and 2001 censuses, the United Church lost 253,995 affiliates, about the same number of people as there were residents in the mid-sized city of Saskatoon (265,259). This decline was coupled with the low percentage of affiliates who actually attended or contributed financially. The WonderCafe website, the keystone and only remaining part of the Emerging Spirit campaign, presents itself as a place for spiritual exploration by anyone. It is clear, however, that this website is also home to tensions between those interested in using it for spiritual exploration and those—primarily Church leaders—who see it as a place to share official ideas and projects.¹¹

The content on WonderCafe reveals significant insights into internal decisions about its direction, and whether it is actually intended as a place for spiritual exploration, or instead, as a place to connect users to the United Church. This chapter seeks to better understand these tensions, aided by Kim Knott's theories on the properties of space. Key to this discussion is Knott's first property of space, which highlights the ways in which spaces gather. Under this property, the interpretation and meaning of a space for one person can be very different when someone else examines it. To determine whether WonderCafe's space is a place to promote spiritual exploration, regardless of affiliation or correspondence with United Church values, or a place for United Church leadership to share their visions for the 21st Century and promote Church projects, the ways in which the website is used for spiritual exploration are explored. This begins with a discussion of the manner in which the website

¹¹ This is in many ways very similar to the tensions discussed by Helland (in press) on the early United Church newsgroup.

itself is presented as having this focus, and moves into a discussion of how the marketing consultants, Smith Roberts, portray WonderCafe on their website. Building on this, the chapter then discusses the Paint Your Faith project developed by the Emerging Spirit campaign, which is hosted on WonderCafe. Finally, it explores how guidelines for activity on WonderCafe also reflect this focus on spiritual exploration.

The second section of this chapter looks at the activities and direction of United Church leadership on the website, for example, the Church Search utility that allows members to find the closest United Church. It then moves into a discussion of the presence of Mardi Tindal, the United Church moderator on WonderCafe, specifically on the Spirit Express portion of the website. Finally, it discusses the presence of the United Church clergy online and the significance of the word ‘rev’ in their usernames.

The third, and final, discussion in this chapter focuses on the less obvious United Church presence on the website. There are four main sections that are administered by the Church, but that do not clearly reflect either side of these tensions: the main page photographs, weekly poll questions, links, and the Twitter feed. This discussion examines how these more subtle representations of important issues reflect either spiritual exploration or the leadership of the church.

This chapter seeks to answer the question of how tensions within the United Church over the purpose of the website are evident in content and other aspects of WonderCafe.

3.1 Spiritual Exploration and Open-Mindedness

The first words to appear on the main page of WonderCafe are “Welcome to the home of open-minded discussion and exploration of spiritual topics, moral issues and life's big questions, brought to you by the people of The United Church of Canada” (WonderCafe

“Mainpage”). Knott’s property of simultaneity highlights the ways that spaces connect to other spaces. In this place WonderCafe connects itself to spaces of spiritual discussion. This emphasis on spiritual exploration continues as a major theme throughout the site, and is presented as one of the primary goals in site descriptions of WonderCafe, as well as in the writings of its marketers, Smith Roberts, in the Paint Your Faith project and on the guidelines for the website.

3.1.1 *How WonderCafe describes itself.*

The WonderCafe website has three main sections that describe its history, background and reason for being. The key idea expressed every time the purpose of WonderCafe is explained, as the quote above illustrates, is that WonderCafe is a United Church project that offers a platform for open-minded discussion and spiritual exploration. The same sentiment is expressed on the About section of the website. This page begins with the question “Why did we open WonderCafe?” and provides the following answer: “Because at The United Church of Canada, we love open-minded discussion on issues that matter to you. And because we believe that it’s important to have a place at which you can explore your spirituality and life’s big questions on your own terms” (WonderCafe “About”). These statements suggest that WonderCafe is hosting space for users to discuss topics that are important to them, regardless of their importance to the United Church and regardless of whether or not this discussion will lead users to the Church.

The Learn More section of the website is of particular importance in this regard, as it serves as a portal between WonderCafe and the United Church as an organization, and explains that the values of open-mindedness and spiritual exploration are also United Church values, not just those belonging to WonderCafe. This sentiment is expressed in statements

such as, “all we’re offering is a place for you to take the first step in a deeper exploration of your faith and life issues. This place should be relevant to you and also reflect key qualities and values of The United Church of Canada, including open-mindedness and freedom of expression” (WonderCafe “Learn More”). More importantly, this section of the website, while acknowledging that part of its goal is to sell the denomination, highlights user-driven spiritual exploration over joining the church. This is explicitly stated: “WonderCafe isn’t just ‘selling’ the denomination. It’s creating a new context for Canadians to talk about spirituality and faith” (WonderCafe, Learn More), emphasizing that a key role for this site is to offer users a place to engage with spiritual topics. Rather than trying to bring new members to church, WonderCafe is presented as a place to learn more about the United Church without actually needing to commit to it: “While we are an ‘organized religion,’ it’s not our intention to ‘recruit’ you. We want to build a relationship with you on your terms and there’s no pressure to walk through our doors” (WonderCafe “Learn More”). The uses of “organized religion” and “recruit” in quotes enables WonderCafe to signal to their online audience that they are aware of the negative connotations associated with those concepts, but that the United Church is different. The last paragraph of the Learn More section, before the link to the United Church website, reads: “It is place you can call your own, a place where you can freely express yourself and explore the issues that excite you and the concerns that weigh upon you. WonderCafe is just that place. And through our online community, we welcome anyone to join us at the table” (WonderCafe “Learn More”). This last paragraph brings the focus back onto the user: The United Church and WonderCafe offer individual users a space to express the issues that really concern them.

These web pages where the site’s purpose is explained highlight two themes. First, WonderCafe is meant to become whatever the user wants it to be. Second, spiritual

exploration and open-mindedness are United Church values. The emphasis on the user means that spiritual topics deemed important are not those which the United Church has decided are important, but instead, those which users themselves are concerned about.

3.1.2 *How Smith Roberts Describes WonderCafe*

The sentiments expressed on the WonderCafe website about its purpose are echoed on a former version of the Smith Roberts website,¹² on which WonderCafe is highlighted as one of the company's successful case studies, along with a campaign for Colleges Ontario. The WonderCafe project also receives significant attention in the promotional video on the main page of the company's site, which highlights "head snap" advertising that grabs viewer attention,¹³ with the first thirty seconds of the video's total two minutes and sixteen seconds focussing on WonderCafe.

Smith Roberts describes the task put to them by the United Church as "daunting." They do not mince words at the difficulty of "turning around the fortunes of a denomination that was becoming increasingly irrelevant to Canadians. Compounding that challenge was research warning us that overt 'religious recruitment' messaging would be resoundingly rejected" (Smith Roberts "Campaign Launch"). It is perhaps important that Smith Roberts highlighted 'recruitment' as something to which Canadians might be particularly averse, as this is also highlighted as potentially distasteful on the WonderCafe website. Smith Roberts' marketing concept was to present the United Church as different from the perceptions that Canadians had about religions. They write that their solution was to "develop an online

¹² The current version of the website shows snapshots of images from all their projects. Visitors can click on the image and open a portfolio of images and videos from the campaign. The United Church portfolio features two print advertisements, a few screen grabs of the WonderCafe website, the EZ Answer Squirrel video and a Paint Your Faith Video. There is no text about their project on the new website.

¹³ The head snap video is one of the few features of the old website that remained on the Smith Roberts website after the upgrade.

community, WonderCafe.ca, that celebrates the very things for which The United Church of Canada stands, including open-minded, non-judgmental, spiritual exploration” (Smith Roberts, “Campaign Launch”).

For Smith Roberts, WonderCafe could not be about recruitment because this would only turn off potential converts. As a result, the focus needed to be about user-driven spiritual exploration in order for potential United Church members to be drawn to the website.

3.1.3 *Paint Your Faith*

Paint Your Faith is one of the key projects on the WonderCafe website. This is presented as a United Church initiative to bring conversations about faith into the public sphere. The Church writes that “Paint Your Faith is a bold initiative to spark public conversations about our values, our experience of spirituality, and the meaning of faith. Through Paint Your Faith, art becomes part of the dialogue, and promotes The United Church of Canada as a gathering place for people to connect and share with each other in their exploration and experience of life, faith, and spirituality” (WonderCafe, “Paint Your Faith”). The project asked graffiti artists from around the world to create murals expressing what faith meant to them. Two murals were created, the first in Toronto in September 2009, and the second in Vancouver in April 2010.

Information about this project on WonderCafe includes two YouTube videos,¹⁴ each with a different focus. The video for Toronto features the artists sharing their thoughts about the opportunity to express what faith means to them and the reasons they created their final

¹⁴ WonderCafe has a YouTube channel with 23 videos, including the Paint Your Faith Videos. The YouTube channel has 36,011 upload views and 35 subscribers. The WonderCafe YouTube channel is found here: <http://www.youtube.com/user/UCCEmergingSpirit>

images; it also includes commentary from members of the United Church who were involved in the project (UCCEmerging Spirit 2009). On the other hand, the Vancouver video focuses on bringing faith to the East Hastings Street area, a neighbourhood notorious for socio-economic problems. This West Coast video targets the struggles the project faced and the hope for renewal among the community, rather than the spiritual vision of the artists (UCCEmergingSpirit 2010). What the videos have in common is that each addresses the issue of bringing spiritual expression into the public realm, and each highlights the concept that spirituality does not have to be linked to the United Church. In fact, there is no indication that any of the artists are members—and it is unlikely that they are, in particular because five of the eight artists are not even from Canada.

What is particularly interesting about this project is that at the same time it is being promoted as a United Church initiative, Paint Your Faith is also being publicized as a Smith Roberts' marketing tactic. On the new Smith Roberts website, for example, the first media that pops up when you click the icon for the United Church is a video of one of the graffiti artists in Toronto's Paint Your Faith project, providing further information about his contribution to the mural. This presentation implies that the concept for this United Church project may not have emerged as a form of spiritual expression from church members or officials at all, but instead was a strategy developed by a marketing firm. It is also interesting that the United Church is apparently committed enough to transparency—and comfortable enough with its use of external consultants—to give Smith Roberts permission to shatter any illusions of spontaneity, while capitalizing on their role. It is also possible that the Church welcomes the additional attention this may bring to WonderCafe.

3.1.4 *Guidelines of Conduct*

The importance of open-mindedness and spiritual exploration is also highlighted in the guidelines for the WonderCafe website, which begin by saying “WonderCafe.ca is committed to providing a forum for open-minded discussion and exploration. It is a place where individuals are free to express their own opinions and beliefs. WonderCafe.ca is equally committed to providing a welcoming and safe site where such open-minded discussion and exploration can flourish” (WonderCafe “Guidelines”). The guidelines continue by explaining that users may encounter others with different opinions, but that they should be courteous and open to debate and exploration. What is important is that of the eight guidelines, four are about making conversations on WonderCafe calm and respectful, and making the website itself a positive place for debate and discussion.

The stress on appropriate behaviour is particularly detailed. Users are told to show courtesy, respect, and politeness even when they do not agree with others, and in particular, to refrain from making personal criticisms of other users (WonderCafe “Guidelines”, 1). They are also told not to be disruptive on the discussion board, with a list of potentially disruptive behaviour that is significantly long:

creating a disproportionate number of posts or discussions to disrupt conversation; cross-posting the same post in different discussion threads, creating off-topic posts or intentionally posting them in the wrong discussion category; posting solicitations without permission of WonderCafe.ca; making statements that are deliberately inflammatory; or any behaviour that interferes with conversations or inhibits the ability of others to use and enjoy this website for its intended purposes. (WonderCafe “Guidelines” 3)¹⁵

Users are also told not post vulgarity on the discussion boards or to link to it (WonderCafe “Guidelines” 4).

¹⁵ The guidelines note that these rules are more for courtesy but that if a user repeatedly does these things action will be taken.

Of these four guidelines, the most important is the second, which deals with the need to refrain from personal criticisms. This is the only rule that threatens to lead to a ban for members who violate it. This guideline reads: “Hateful language that could be seen as meaning to inflict hatred or violence against others—including racist, sexist and homophobic attacks—will not be tolerated. Posts that include such language may be deleted and the user banned from the site” (WonderCafe “Guideline” 2). Attacking other users on this website is absolutely not acceptable.

3.1.5 Safe Spiritual Exploration

The WonderCafe website is repeatedly described as a place for open-minded spiritual exploration. This is highlighted throughout the website, as well as by the Smith Roberts advertising company. Creating a space to allow this exploration is also a key reason for the website guidelines and is a prominent value on the main page. However, while the activities on the rest of the website, including the discussion boards, may host this type of open discussion, the pages that specifically explain this focus are far from the most prominent features of the website. For example, the About, Learn More, and Paint Your Faith sections are all secondary links on the left hand side of the website, while Guidelines are linked in small print at the bottom of the website.

3.2 Church Leadership

Spiritual exploration may be a dominant theme throughout WonderCafe, but there is a competing force: United Church leadership. Knott writes that spaces connect with other spaces. It should not be surprising that WonderCafe links back to the United Church, its host. Throughout the website, there are expressions of United Church hierarchy and more overt

promotion of the United Church itself. Although the United Church is not immediately visible on the opening page of the website, beyond the one introductory sentence quoted earlier, it does not take long to discern the influence of the Church and its leadership throughout the site. This appears in several prominent places: the Church Search, the Moderator's blog, the Spirit Express section, in user profiles, and in the website rules. These examples offer a way to understand how WonderCafe can become a space for many different purposes.

3.2.1 *Church Search*

The Church Search is one of the most visible sections of the site, and falls third in the list of primary links on the left hand side of WonderCafe. Further, unlike the other four links, the Church Search has white writing on a grey background, rather than white on a coloured background. As grey disrupts the spectrum of colours that the primary links create, the Church Search becomes a very visible element for visitors of this website.

The Church Search feature offers a place for users to find United Churches in their area. Visitors to this page can enter their postal code and receive a list of all United Churches within ten kilometers of where they live. Users also have the option of searching for a church by name or looking at a list of churches (WonderCafe "Church Search").

This search page also gives users the address of each selected church and its distance from the user's location. For example, I learned that the closest United Church is MacKay United Church, which is 0.8 km from my house. Churches also have the ability to create their own profiles on WonderCafe. Of the ten closest churches to my house, six have created profiles, and can therefore add more information to their search results, including website, phone number, email address and a picture of the church. Within each profile, there is also a

picture of the church and information about the minister on the left side of the page, with a map below marking the location of the church. Also included are quick descriptions of churches, times of services and information about the neighbourhood. Below this are “Quick Facts” about each church, including: “What music is played during services?”; “How do people dress for services?”; and “What happens after the service?” I now know that at MacKay United Church they have a mix of traditional and modern music performed on a Yamaha C7 grand piano, that what I wear is not important, that there is coffee, tea and juice after services, and that guests are given a special visitor’s mug (WonderCafe “MacKay United Church”). If these answers did not suit users’ preferences, they could search for another church that might be a better fit.

What is particularly interesting is that it is much easier to find a church on the WonderCafe website than on the United Church of Canada website. The link to the church finder on the United Church website is on the right side of the screen, below the header with the main links, an advertisement for recent United Church publications, a donate button and the message from the moderator. Once in the church finder, the search engine is less straightforward to use, although it gives many more options. The postal code search did not work for my location and instead generated a list of all churches in the K1 postal area, the first of which was in Gloucester, a significant distance from my home. Unlike the WonderCafe site, the list of churches does not give any information about location until you select a church, at which point a new page opens with its address, phone number, email address and website link, if applicable (United Church, 2011c).

The enhanced visibility, user-friendly approach and usefulness of the search on the WonderCafe page indicates that this site is offering a far more useful service in terms of linking potential United Church members to congregations than the United Church website

itself has done, which may mean that WonderCafe is actually more actively focused on attracting new members than the United Church website is. In any case, the visibility of the Church Search feature promotes the United Church among WonderCafe members and offers a very clear and visible link from WonderCafe to the United Church.

3.2.2 Moderator Mardi Tindal

United Church moderator Mardi Tindal has a profile on WonderCafe and keeps a blog on that site, username “Moderator Mardi Tindal”. It is an interesting decision for the moderator to have her blog hosted on WonderCafe, a website promoted for spiritual exploration, rather than somewhere else. It is also interesting that she was not a member of WonderCafe until she was elected as moderator. Perhaps she is taking advantage of the infrastructure already developed by the United Church, but as a point of comparison, the director of the Emerging Spirit campaign does not have a blog on WonderCafe, but instead has a blog run by a third party.

Tindal updates her blog frequently, if sporadically. On average, it is updated about once a week, but at times there are large gaps between updates. Her blog posts provide messages about United-Church-related topics. For example, after Charles Lewis wrote an article about unity within the United Church, featuring an interview with Tindal, Tindal took to the blog to offer a response. The majority of her posts relate to United Church events that she has attended or provide sermon-style reflections on current events.

Tindal also takes part on the discussion boards but only to a very limited extent. First, Tindal responded to some user questions about her Spirit Express campaign on the forums. Second, Tindal participated in a Lenten workshop that took place on the forums in April 2011. The moderator is not readily visible on the main page of the website, but it is not

difficult to find her. Because she updates her blog fairly frequently, her blog posts often come up on the main page and appear on the blog roll section of the website.

WonderCafe is clearly offering space for the head of the United Church, which may be seen to contradict the notion that the site is to be open for spiritual exploration without United Church dominance.

3.2.3 *Spirit Express*

The Spirit Express section of WonderCafe is probably the most United-Church- and moderator-centric part of the website. Spirit Express is a tour that Moderator Mardi Tindal is taking across Canada by train to engage United Church members in discussions about climate change (WonderCafe “Spirit Express”). This page is the last of the secondary links on the left hand side of the page, which while at the bottom, is very visible.

The main Spirit Express webpage offers a list of links to visitors with information on the project, a schedule of stops, the Spirit Express Flickr page and Tindal’s Twitter feed, along with more generic links to the United Church YouTube page and news site. Visitors are also given a link to test their own carbon footprints. This part of the website is not particularly interactive. Other than the link to the slightly heated discussion about the Spirit Express campaign, the only way visitors can interact is to sign the guest book. The guest book contains a long form for visitors to fill out, providing information about their own green efforts (WonderCafe “Guest Book”). Users cannot see what other visitors have filled out so it seems that the information is simply being gathered for United Church purposes.

The Spirit Express portion of the website does not offer information in an exploratory user-to-user style. Instead, it offers top-down guidance about how to be environmentally friendly and provides information about where users can find the moderator on her travels

across Canada. The implication of these pages not being interactive is that environmentalism is being highlighted as a value that the United Church finds important. It is a “good” thing. In the Spirit Express section, the focus of WonderCafe shifts considerably away from the user and onto official United Church ideas—or, ideas by one prominent United Church official.

3.2.4 *Username*s

The fifth point in the Guidelines for Conduct section of WonderCafe is about the types of usernames that can be chosen on the website. In addition to the rules that specify users can be anonymous, should not wrongly claim to be web administrators, and cannot adopt names from divine figures, comes the strong suggestion that users not identify themselves as religious leaders: “To help create an environment that encourages discussion and the equality of perspectives, users may want to avoid using titles as part of their user name, such as “Dr.,” “Rev.,” “Fr.,” etc.” (WonderCafe “Guidelines” 5).

This guideline is clearly not adhered to by users. Even the moderator of the United Church herself does not follow it, as her username is “Moderator Mardi Tindal.” Many users on the site have names with the word “Rev” in them. Of the sample of users I collected, ten of two hundred users—or more than one third of those who identified as United Church clergy—who had “Rev” in their usernames. There were also several others who, despite not spelling out “Rev”, included a picture of themselves in what was clearly clergy clothing.

As a result, despite the guidelines and the website’s initial best efforts, a hierarchy is established in discussions online as some members are easily identified as part of the official Church organization.

3.2.5 Website Guidelines

It is worth revisiting the website guidelines. The only guideline about online conduct that could lead to being banned was guideline two, which outlined that members who used “Hateful language that could be seen as meaning to inflict hatred or violence against others—including racist, sexist and homophobic attacks—will not be tolerated” (WonderCafe “Guideline” 2). While on the one hand this statement is making room for members to express their spiritual beliefs in a safe environment without fear of being attacked by other members, it is also significant that racist, sexist and homophobic attacks are singled out. The guidelines emphasise that this spiritual exploration is not taking place in a completely open-ended environment. There are specific regulations that come hand in hand with this spiritual exploration. By highlighting racism, sexism and homophobia, the United Church is also highlighting its own values. In the human rights campaigns of the United Church, racial justice, gender justice and sexual diversity are all highlighted as important. If WonderCafe allowed spiritual exploration to include these behaviours, that would signify that it was allowing spiritual exploration beyond the scope of the United Church. It should be no surprise that many religious groups have been criticised for sexist, racist or homophobic beliefs, and for promoting those values among their members. By highlighting these in a negative way, the United Church is excluding that type of spiritual exploration.

3.2.6 Church Leadership Online

A detailed examination of WonderCafe makes it quickly clear that while there are options for spiritual exploration, this is indeed a United Church website that promotes United Church values, especially environmentalism. While the website is not officially trying to “recruit” users, it is making it is very easy for them to find their local United Church.

Further, spiritual exploration on WonderCafe is not completely open-ended; while users can explore, there are some limitations to appropriate material.

In this way WonderCafe has become home to two different messages: WonderCafe as a place of spiritual exploration and WonderCafe as a place to promote United Church interests. These two competing messages offer an example of Knott's concept of configuration. Spaces can be understood differently by different people. Knott refers to this as ways that spaces gather. Thus, within WonderCafe both purposes, spiritual exploration and church leadership, exist without much visible conflict.

3.3 Uncovering Website Values

Throughout WonderCafe, the values of open-mindedness, non-judgement, discussion and spiritual exploration are highlighted as values not only of the website but of the United Church of Canada. This section seeks to explore the presence of these values on WonderCafe in the sections of the website that are less overt about what they are trying to share. Do these values come out or do other values emerge?

In several parts of the website, the tension between spiritual exploration and church leadership is less obvious but is still present. These are the sections that do not feature writing about the church, but instead offer images, questions and links that while not overt about the values they support, nevertheless promote certain ideas and concepts above other simply by selection, i.e., the fact that they are chosen to be highlighted. There are three main sections that offer this more subtle exploration of these tensions. These are the main page photos, poll questions and Twitter feed.

3.3.1 *Main Page Photos*

The main page of the WonderCafe website features prominent photos. Ten images rotate through this spot, each featuring a black and white photo of two or more people with a thought-provoking question written along its lower edge. This section is probably the first, immediately visible portion of the website. These images reflect a number of different values. Surprisingly Spiritual Exploration, while present, is less prominent in these images, while Church leadership is not present at all. Instead, the themes of parenting and family come across as the most prominent values. In some images, the values that are presented are not very clear at all.

Across the ten images on the website,¹⁶ nine questions are asked: “Why are we here?”, listed twice; “Are kids too independent or not independent enough?”; “How can we make the world a better place?”; “Is good news really contagious?”; “What makes us smile?”; “How can I achieve balance in my life?”; “Is there really a right and wrong?”; “Who is teaching who?”; and “What will I celebrate today?” It is difficult to determine the meaning behind these images when faced with the words alone, although two questions have clear moral and spiritual links (“Why are we here?” and “Is there really a right and wrong”) and one has clear family undertones (“Are kids too independent or not independent enough?”). In order to better understand the messages in the images, this chapter examines each individually and asks the questions: What is happening in this image? How does the text connect to the image? What question does this image mark as important? What message does this picture put forward?

There are two images with the text “Why are we here?”, which appear to promote slightly different values. One shows a young woman looking confidently and directly at the

¹⁶ See the www.wondercafe.ca for a selection of these images.

camera. Behind her are two women engaged in conversation. They appear to be sitting on benches outside, and only one of the faces of the background women is visible. This image looks as though the women could be engaging in the type of deep discussion in which questions such as “why are we here?” would arise. This image identifies spiritual questions as appropriate for discussion, and highlights the fact that spiritual exploration is a topic on WonderCafe.

The second “Why are we here?” image sends a different message. This one features a man and a woman sitting together with their opposite gendered children on their knees. The man, woman and young boy are smiling. This image appears to offer a different interpretation of “Why are we here?”, and in this case, the answer seems to relate to family.

Another image with strong family and parenting ties is the one that reads “Are kids too independent or not independent enough?” This image features a young girl in the centre of the picture on a scooter. Two parents and a younger boy are behind. The mother helps the boy on his scooter while his father watches him. The image and the text together highlight family and parenting at a far greater level. The image raises the question of involvement of parents in the lives of their children as an important topic for discussion. It marks parenting as an issue that is also up for discussion on WonderCafe.

The father and daughter from this image are also in the image that reads “Who’s teaching who?” This picture shows the daughter looking at the fish she is holding in her hands, while her father holds her and looks towards the camera. This composition indicates that the question is related to parenting, and once more, this image tells new visitors to the website that discussions about parenting are part of WonderCafe.

Another image that highlights the family is the one that reads “What will I celebrate today?” This image shows a young girl with a young woman and an older woman. They are

eating Chinese food together, looking at each other or the food, and everyone is smiling. This suggests that family is something worth celebrating, and thereby emphasised.

Family is also an overarching theme in the image that says “How can I achieve balance in my life?” This picture shows a family gathered around a barbeque. The mother has her arms around her daughter and looks over to her husband. Her husband is poking at the barbeque and the son is looking at the barbeque. Everyone looks happy. The question itself does not necessarily have to relate to family issues. However, in this case, it clearly does, and points to the extended question, “How do I make time for my family?”, again highlighting family—in its traditional nuclear form—as an important topic for discussion.

One image that is difficult to classify is the one that reads “What makes us smile?” This features a young woman smiling at the camera. She is sitting at a table with three other individuals who are out of focus. Her body is facing the table but her head is turned towards the camera. One interpretation could be that spending time with her family is making her smile, thus placing this image as yet another that highlights the value of family.

An image that is harder to classify is the one that reads “Is good news really contagious?”, which shows a man and woman sitting together, the man with his arm her, looking at the camera and smiling. Do they have personal good news to share? Or might this be referring to good news in the traditional Christian, Biblical sense? It is difficult to be sure, although the focus on the Christian good news seems out of place as there are few Christian-centric or Biblical-centric references on WonderCafe, outside of the content created by users. The question seems to be one to spark discussion, so I think it might be more towards spiritual exploration, even if it is not directly tied to Christianity.

An image that may reflect United Church values is the one that reads, “How can we make the world a better place?” The picture shows seven children in a group with their arms

around each other looking at the camera. One way to interpret this image is that the children are asking what they can do to make the world a better place, while another interpretation is that the image is asking the viewer how they will make the world a better place for these and other children. This emphasis on action is something that fits in well with the United Church emphasis on social justice.

The final image, and an image that may also emphasise United Church values, reads “Is there really right and wrong?” The image feature two men lying on their stomachs on a bed propped up by pillows. One looks off camera while the other looks at what appears to be a remote. This image could easily be interpreted as one showing a same-sex relationship. If so, it fits with the emphasis on sexual diversity within the United Church.

The majority of these images emphasise family or parenting. Two of the ten may focus on United Church values, while another two may focus on spiritual exploration. In all, six of ten highlight family. While there are forums on the discussion boards focused on parenting and relationships, there is no mention of family beyond this. What the emphasis on family may flow from, however, is the focus on 30-45 year olds with families at whom the Emerging Spirit campaign is targeted. Thus, visitors to the website will see questions that are familiar to them as parents, which may signify that WonderCafe is a place for people like them. These images have less to do with the United Church sharing its values than engaging users with the website.

3.3.2 Poll Questions

The poll questions on WonderCafe’s main page are another place where the site’s values are expressed in a more subtle way. These questions change weekly and usually focus on current issues. There are 164 questions recorded, which were reviewed to determine

whether these could be understood using the spiritual exploration versus the United Church leadership dynamic, and whether this changed in any way over time.

An analysis of these questions shows that far more relate to the United Church than to spirituality in general. In all, sixteen focussed on the Church, while only seven touched on general spirituality. If one is to include environmentalism as a United Church value, then the total number of United-Church-centric questions moves to 25. Although more questions have been posted about the United Church in the past year than four years ago, questions about the Church are not new. There have been six in the past year, four a year ago, one two years ago, four three years ago and one four years ago.

Far more popular are questions about politics, holidays and sports. I suspect that these questions try to engage the users with the website by asking them questions about their opinions on current events, thus providing a chance to share opinions on something relevant right at the beginning of the visit. What is interesting is the scarcity of general spirituality questions, which may reflect two things. Either it might be difficult to find two to four short answer options for the kind of spiritual questions that users might want to discuss, or, perhaps deciding poll questions falls under the role of the United Church website administrators, in which case they may be more likely to reflect the values of Church leadership than if they were developed by other users.

3.3.3 *Links*

Several images and pieces of text are linked to other parts of WonderCafe or to other websites. In her analysis Knott emphasizes the importance of exploring the ways that spaces link to each other. In a hyperlinked online environment, links to other websites are very easy to trace. Helland (2000) argues that links are an important marker of whether or not the

website falls closer towards one side of the religion online/online religion spectrum than another. The importance of links also surfaces in their absence: when there are no outside links, users are not directed to other websites as all information is contained within one place. The importance of website links has also been studied by Cheong et. al. (2009), who have examined how the links on a religious website can be used to study connections within the church. Finally, Apolito (2005), in his study of websites devoted to Marian apparitions, shows how quickly users can find themselves outside a religious message when they follow links from religious websites. Hyperlinks are part of the internet and it is unusual to find a website that does not link away from itself. By understanding the types of links the WonderCafe website chooses to place, one can better understand the types of things that WonderCafe considers important enough to direct viewers to. There are two main places on the website with links: in banner advertisements, and on the Spirit Express page.

3.3.3.1 Banner Ads

WonderCafe does not have advertisements on the main page of the website. Instead, there are banner ads on other pages. Unlike many websites, these ads do not come from companies paying for advertising, which is important because it means that the United Church is not selling space for money. When I visited the website, these advertisements directed users to three main places: the United Church Observer, its official magazine; the United Church resource distribution centre, which sells United Church published books and other materials; and information on the United Church youth gathering. These links keep users within the United Church realm.

The United Church Resource Distribution¹⁷ centre link shows an image that says “UCRD recommends” with pictures of three books next to it. The link takes users to a list of recommended books for sale. The United Church does not publish these recommended books, but they are available for sale on this page. Of the eight recommended books, only one is about the United Church. The link to this page may generate revenue for the church if users decide to buy any of the recommended books.

The link to the United Church Observer¹⁸ takes users to its main page and offers access to its online version. This monthly magazine is a major publication by the United Church, which offers articles about spirituality, ethics, social justice and arts. Linking to this website connects WonderCafe firmly to the United Church of Canada.

An even more obvious United Church link is the one to Rendez-Vous 2011,¹⁹ which provides users with an opportunity to register for this annual gathering for youth members of the United Church. This is an important leadership development activity, and placing this link on the website highlights United Church leadership on WonderCafe.

3.3.3.2 Spirit Express

The Spirit Express section of the website offers many links that take visitors away from WonderCafe. This section probably offers the highest concentration of links in one place. There are three types. The first lead to websites such as YouTube, Flickr and Twitter, which, while not owned by the United Church or WonderCafe, host United Church content. The second set go to United Church initiatives, for example, the Green Awakening project,²⁰

¹⁷ <http://www.ucrdstore.ca/>

¹⁸ <http://www.ucobserver.org/>

¹⁹ <http://www.rendez-vous2011.org/>

²⁰ <http://www.tucc.ca/churchdevelopment/green-awakening-network.html>

which is part of the Toronto United Church Council. The third set of links go to non-United Church environmental pages, such as a website where users can measure their own carbon footprints, and a link to the Climate Change Accountability Act. This section is one of the most United-Church-centric parts of the WonderCafe website. It is unsurprising, therefore, that these links offer users information about areas of interest or actions the United Church considers important, rather than leading to places where users can encounter spiritual exploration.

3.3.4 *Twitter Feed*

The WonderCafe Twitter²¹ account is another place to examine links that WonderCafe makes to other websites and also back to itself. Twitter is a website where users, of which WonderCafe is one, can post short 140 character, text-based posts, or tweets. These tweets appear on the profile of the Twitter user. Other users can subscribe to the Twitter feed and get updated when the users they subscribe to post new tweets. WonderCafe tweets links to highlighted posts on the discussion boards and links to interesting websites. The Twitter feed updates several times a day and has 1,155 followers. For this thesis, 214 tweets on the Twitter page were tracked over a period of one month, and it was determined that in order to understand the Twitter feed, it is necessary to examine both the links back to WonderCafe and the links away from WonderCafe.

3.3.4.1 Links to WonderCafe

There were 93 tweets that linked back to the WonderCafe website. Eight of these linked to blog posts, while 85 linked to posts on the discussion boards, where several

²¹ <http://twitter.com/#!/wondercafe>

questions are asked more than once and in all there are 66 unique links. The blogs and discussion boards should be treated differently because the types of interaction they support differ. On the discussion boards readers can respond and post their own opinions, and thereby get involved in the conversation, while tweets linking to blogs give users a chance to read the blog. While some external blogs feature dynamic conversations in the comments area, this is not the case on WonderCafe. In reviewing these tweets, the types of blog posts and conversations that were highlighted were examined, and consideration was given to whether these blogs and conversations reflected the goals of spiritual exploration or those of Church leadership.

WonderCafe blog posts highlighted by the United Church through its Twitter feed predominantly reflected discussions within the United Church. Of the eight posts, four were sermons, one was about a baby and parent bible study group at a United Church and one was about being a United Church minister and retiring. Of the eight highlighted blogs, United Church ministers wrote seven. It is fair to say that these posts are predominantly United-Church focused, which is actually also the case of WonderCafe blogs in general.

There is a slightly different story on the discussion boards. Of the 85 tweets directed there, 32% link to the Religion and Spirituality forum, 17% link to the Church Life forum, and 11% link to the Popular Culture forum. However, these tweets are not proportionate to the popularity of the actual threads on the discussion board. For example, 36% of threads posted on the website are related to religion and faith, which corresponds with the 32% of tweeted posts. However, only 3% of threads are about church life, compared to 17% of tweeted posts. This would indicate that for WonderCafe's Twitter account, one of the most important topics is about congregational activities and life within church and the United Church specifically.

There is a slightly different story on the discussion boards themselves. Of the 66 unique questions raised at the time of study, eight had to do with the United Church, while an additional six were stories from a church, but did not specify whether or not they were about the United Church. Those threads that talked about the United Church focused on topics such as how the United Church invests its money, a story about a transgendered United Church minister, and a celebration of United Church ministers in general. This indicates that United Church topics do not make up a large part of discussion, as might be indicated from the Twitter feed, but they are certainly present.

In reviewing this, consideration was given to whether the 32% of tweeted posts that directed viewers toward the Religion and Faith forum reflected questions about spiritual exploration or something else, and it was determined that all but two of these posts were about general faith discussions, including conversations about the afterlife, why people pray and how to teach children about God. These tweets far better reflected the nature of the spiritual exploration portion of the website.

Thus, the Tweets that link back to WonderCafe offer a mix of spiritual exploration and United-Church-centric posts, and therefore whoever is tweeting for WonderCafe is focussing on both areas.

3.3.4.2 Links Outside WonderCafe

The links on the Twitter page that do not direct users back to WonderCafe take users away to a number of different locations. These include other United Church initiatives, the Huffington post religion section, CNN and YouTube. An analysis of these links also provides insights into WonderCafe.

Of the 121 tweets, 20 directed users to United Church initiatives. These include articles in the United Church Observer (6), links to United Church projects (3) and links to the new United Church online seminars for ministers (5). Thus, the official side of the United Church does not dominate the Twitter feed, although it makes up a noticeable portion.

The next largest portion of tweets are those that relate to strategies for congregations to bring or keep members (19). These directed users to Huffington Post articles, posts from the Sojourners blog and other religiously themed internet sites. I found this interesting. These types of articles would be particularly useful for people invested in the Emerging Spirit campaign, but they do not really reflect the public face of WonderCafe, as WonderCafe never overtly says that its goal is congregational renewal.

These two categories, United Church and congregational renewal, make up 32% of non-WonderCafe directed tweets. Additionally, there are a number of tweets that deal with what might be seen as hot button United Church issues. This includes tweets about homosexuality and Christianity (7) and the environment (5), for total of 42% of the non-WonderCafe tweets on the Twitter feed.

Only ten tweets were clearly not related to religion, linking to articles on a variety of topics, including child slavery, people living with disabilities and the reboot of DC comics, while the vast majority were related to religion. While a few of these posts could fall into the topic of spiritual exploration, for example an article exploring whether or not yoga is religious and an excerpt from Desmond Tutu's new book *God is not A Christian*, the majority were not easily categorised, although they may be of interest to United Church members or people exploring spirituality.

3.3.4.3 Lessons from the Twitter Feed

Tweets from WonderCafe link to content from many different sources. These include discussions on the WonderCafe website, as well as on a variety of websites across the internet, and includes linked content that emphasises spiritual exploration as well as content that highlights the interests of the Church leadership. In fact, the majority of the content in the Twitter feed links to discussions, articles and blogs that reflect the values of the church leadership. These tweets include content about activities within the United Church, as well as content about Church renewal and the environment. The Twitter feed is controlled by the United Church and while other users can read and reply to tweets, the users do not have very much presence or influence on the content of the Twitter feed. It should not be surprising then, that the majority of tweets link users to United Church interests, rather than to general discussions about exploring spirituality.

3.4 Conclusion

There is a certain amount of tension evident in the content of WonderCafe with respect to whether this website is designed to be used as a place for spiritual exploration or one to overtly promote the United Church. It would appear that the United Church focus on the website is actually one that recently became more prominent. Knott highlights the ways in which space changes over time as one of the important properties of space, a factor with high importance on a website where changes are easy to make. After Smith Roberts changed their webpage, a new piece of data was uncovered. Their WonderCafe profile included a number of early screen captures, which showed that several important aspects initially differed from the layout of the current site. First, the original welcome wording omitted the “brought to you by the people of the United Church of Canada” sentence, thus removing any

reference to the United Church on the main page of the website. Internet archives²² provided more information as to when this statement made its way onto the website. Originally the “brought to you” line was only posted at the very bottom of the main page in small print. This new addition seems to have been added sometime between January and March 2010, which is shortly after the 40th general council and the end of ties between WonderCafe and Smith Roberts.

In addition, the list of links on the left side of the page is different. Importantly, these screen captures show that the Church Search section was originally not in the center of the primary links, but at the bottom of the secondary links. Instead of the Church Search section in the primary links, there was a Features section. This section was used to provide links to featured blog posts from WonderCafe members and invited guests. The last featured article dates back to May 2010.²³ The Church Search section did not move into the primary link section until sometime this year.

Although the main discussion boards were launched at the end of 2006, the Church Life forum did not start until 2009, when it was opened as a place for members to discuss the 40th General Council of the United Church; after those meetings passed, it became a general forum for United Church discussions. This is another example of the increasing presence of church leadership on WonderCafe.

The changes to these pages indicate that the United Church has become more prominent on WonderCafe over time. This shift in content indicates that some people within the United Church felt that the Church should receive more focus on WonderCafe. The way content has been rearranged and added shows an increasing emphasis on the United Church

²² http://wayback.archive.org/web/*/http://www.wondercafe.ca

²³ Interestingly, this section continues to be updated on the French WonderCafe.

itself. Some of the tensions on WonderCafe, specifically in the beginning, could have been between the United Church, eager to bring new members into the Church, and the external consultants, who believed that Canadians would be turned off by very churchy messages. Perhaps as the website established itself and a core group of users developed, the United Church felt more comfortable bringing itself into the picture. This is aided by the high number of United Church ministers on these pages, who use WonderCafe to promote their own churches and share their own ideas about spirituality. What is interesting is how this tension relates to Castells' (2001) discussion of the internet for user freedom or profit. On the one hand, WonderCafe is a space for users to explore religion without many restrictions, an idea that comes up against the United Church's desire to use the website to bring new members to the United Church itself. In reality, WonderCafe does both things and more, almost seamlessly, as are explored in the next chapter, which brings the users of WonderCafe more fully into the picture.

WonderCafe's space can be understood in two different but complimentary ways, both of which have a link to United Church theology. The emphasis on open-mindedness and acceptance can be linked to the United Church's position on inclusivity and multi-faith relations. This focus appears on the surface to contradict the focus of WonderCafe on one church, namely the United Church of Canada. Perhaps the tension over spiritual exploration and the promotion of the United Church as an institution to people is also reflective of tensions over values that play out within the United Church itself and historically in United Church theology.

Chapter Four: User Identity and Negotiation on WonderCafe

The previous chapter has illustrated that WonderCafe is home to a series of tensions about what its purpose really is. For example, is it a website designed to let users explore spiritual issues without pressure to commit to the United Church? Or is it a website for the United Church to share ideas and causes with current and potential members? WonderCafe content shows that strands representing both values are present online, but it must be noted that there is also clear and potentially growing influence of United Church leadership on the website.

These distinctions are complicated by the fact that WonderCafe takes advantage of Web 2.0 technology, which means that users themselves play a significant role in creating and interacting with content (Lim and Palacios-Marques 2011). WonderCafe is also a social networking website, which means that users create their own profiles and interact with other members under these profiles (Corrocher 2011). Thus, in order to best understand WonderCafe, one cannot ignore the user-generated content. Today, the average monthly traffic for WonderCafe in 2011 is 41,000 visitors, with 26,000 unique visitors (AaronMcGallegos).²⁴ How do these users fall within this tension between spiritual exploration and promoting the United Church? Do user activities tend to occur in one area over another, or do users create space for activities outside of this dichotomy? How do users create their own spaces on WonderCafe? At the heart of these questions is Helland's religion online/online religion distinction. Does WonderCafe offer a space for users to learn about the United Church from the United Church's perspective, or does it offer a place for users to experiment with and interact with religion on their own terms, outside of church influence?

²⁴ On the month before the General Council the website had 72,144 visits from 59,259 unique visitors (General Council 788)

In order to answer these questions, this chapter describes the profile of the users of WonderCafe. Using this information and Lorne Dawson's typology of online communities, it considers whether the users of WonderCafe are in fact an online community.

Knott's spatial analysis lends further insight into this exploration of online communities: configuration, or the ways spaces gather, helps in understanding the different ways WonderCafe is used; extension, or the way space changes over time, aids in exploring how WonderCafe was changed since its inception; simultaneity, or how spaces link to other spaces, offers a way to understand the issues of interest to WonderCafe members; and power dynamics provide a way to explore the relationship between United Church messages and the users.

Finally, this chapter brings these discussions into perspective by examining how these activities can help us understand where WonderCafe fits into the distinction between online religion and religion online. This examination should bring together the goals of the website to clarify the ways in which WonderCafe acts as a place for spiritual exploration and as a place to promote United Church values, and also how WonderCafe users are given freedom to create their own spaces on this site.

4.1 WonderCafe Users

In information about the purpose of WonderCafe on its website, no specific type of person is singled out as an ideal potential member. This differs from the focus of the Emerging Spirit webpage, which targets people aged 30-45. However, by examining this site it is possible to learn about the people who actually use it, and this section offers an exploration of these users of WonderCafe.

User profiles are visible to anyone who visits the website, whether member or non-member, and the second secondary link on the website goes to a list of members. This list is sorted by how recently each user has logged into the website, and thus someone who logged in a few minutes ago is listed higher than someone who last logged in two years ago. Although there are more than 15,000 users on Wondercafe, most are not active. I collected a sample of 200 users by recording the information from the first 200 user profiles that came up when I initiated sample collection in June. Recording these users meant that the most active users on the website over that time period were recorded and information was not collected about users who have never been active on WonderCafe or have not been active for several years.

In order to better understand the type of users on WonderCafe, this chapter examines them in two broad areas, looking first at their basic demographic information, and second, at their religious identity.

4.1.1 *WonderCafe User Demographics*

The users on WonderCafe represent a diverse group of men and women from across Canada, with a wide range of ages. The majority of users in my sample included their gender in their profile; only seven of 200 users did not disclose this, and two of these were actually churches.²⁵ The number of women compared to men in the sample is very close, and 52.5% of users were women.²⁶

The age of members on WonderCafe is far more significant. The profile of all members includes the age range in which the user is located, broken down by the following

²⁵ A few churches have created accounts on the WonderCafe. Outside of a few members in groups, I did not see very much activity on the website coming from users who were actually churches.

²⁶ This includes one openly transgendered woman who is counted as female.

categories: under 18, 18-29, 30-45, 46-59 and over 60.²⁷ The users of the website are weighted towards the older end of this age spectrum. There are only three users in the under 18 category, which makes up less than 2% of my sample. On the other hand, almost 20% of the users are over age 60. The Emerging Spirit target group of age 30-45 comprised 29.95% of the sample, making it the second largest category of users, which means that WonderCafe is attracting users in its 30-45 demographic, as well as many people beyond it.²⁸ Additionally, the range of age on WonderCafe closely reflects the aging demographics of the United Church itself. This means that WonderCafe has, for the most part, attracted older people as well as some people within its target range, but has not been very successful at bringing a younger group to the website.

The WonderCafe users in my sample were from across Canada, with only 13 from outside the country.²⁹ The majority in the sample were from Ontario (38.5%), which is not surprising as Ontario is the most populous province. A significant portion, 20%, did not indicate which province they were from. Under-represented were Quebec users, with only one member in the sample identifying as being from Quebec. This also is not surprising for two reasons. First, this part of the website is in English, thus excluding French-speaking members from the sample.³⁰ Second, identification with Roman Catholicism dominates

²⁷ Unfortunately, there are 13 users in the sample whose age range fell into a different system that cut across the above ranges; these 13 users fell into the range of 25-40 or over 40. I am not sure why these users have a different range. All them, however, have been on the website for four years so this may reflect an older profile system. These 13 users may have not updated their profile from an older version on the site, but this is pure speculation. I am not counting these 13 users in my analysis of age because they straddle different age ranges. For interest sake, there are four users in the 25-40 range and nine in the over 40 range.

²⁸ As a point of comparison, a report to the 40th General Council of the United Church that recorded 747 registered members who logged into WonderCafe in April 2009 indicated that the age demographics of WonderCafe were as follows: under 18, 11.8%; 18-29, 19.0%; 30-45, 30.7%; 46-59, 26.4; over 60, 12.2%.

²⁹ This should not be surprising because the promotion of the website in advertising and the media coverage was in Canada. It is surprising that non-Canadian members found out about the website in the first place. One might think that perhaps some of the early international media coverage picked up a few users; however, none of the non-Canadian members had been members of the site for more than two years.

³⁰ There is a French version of WonderCafe called *caféchange* (<http://cafechange.wondercafe.ca/>)

Quebec's religious makeup (Statistics Canada 2003, 12), and this religious population may not find a United Church initiative appealing.

Finally, the time of activity on WonderCafe indicates the amount of commitment the user has given to the website. The largest portion of users in the sample have been members of the website for at least four years (47%). The more recent members of the sample were broken down by similar percentages: three years (13%), two years (12%), one year (13.5%) and less than one year (14.5%). This data indicates a number of things. First, there was a surge in membership in the first year of the website. Second, the dedicated members of the site have been members for quite some time. Third, growth in site membership has been fairly steady after the first year.

4.1.2 Religious Identity of WonderCafe Users

WonderCafe was created to be a space for users to discuss spiritual issues that interest them. The advertising campaign for the website uses Christian imagery, so one would expect that people using the website would be Christian or at least interested in Christianity. Further, the website provides church inserts for United Churches to print and distribute through their church programs and bulletins; thus, it would not be surprising if many of the members of the website are in fact United Church members. With this in mind, let's consider what religious backgrounds WonderCafe members actually have.

The majority of users in my sample (53%) do not list their religious affiliations in their profile. This may indicate that WonderCafe has tapped into exactly the audience it wanted, the non-affiliated. It is also likely, however, that a portion of these users has simply decided not to reveal religious identity through the profile. The largest portion of those users who list their religious affiliation are affiliated with the United Church, making up 33.5% of

my sample. The next largest group are those who identify as Christian (8%), who talk about God, Jesus and the Bible in their profiles but do not indicate whether they are members of the United Church. Within the sample, there were also a few members who identified as Atheists (four members), Pagans (two members) and a Muslim (one member), but they do not make up a significant proportion of the group under study.

The length of time as a member of WonderCafe appears to have some relationship with identifications as a member of the United Church. Of those members who have been on the site for more than four years, 55% identify as members of the United Church, while only 33% do not provide any information. Users within the sample who have been members for less than a year were far less likely to reveal their religious identity (85%). Only 11% of new members identified as members of the United Church. A number of hypotheses can be proposed from this data. Perhaps those who have been long-term members were won over by the website and became members of the United Church. Alternatively, members of the website may simply become more comfortable revealing their identity when they have been members for a longer time. Finally, it is likely that United Church members became interested in the initiative through their church and joined very early on, after hearing about the project in their local congregations.

In addition to the high number of United Church members on the website, there is a high number of United Church Clergy, as well. This group makes up the largest single category of user occupations within my sample, at 13.5% of the total sample.³¹ Another way of looking at this is to say that among active members of WonderCafe, the concentration of United Church clergy is higher than that of any other single occupation.

³¹ There was also one member of the wiccan clergy.

This high concentration of United Church members and clergy may lead to more topics on the discussion boards or blogs about the United Church, shifting discussion away from spiritual exploration in general and onto matters related to Church practises or goals.

4.2 User Activities Online

Users are able to participate on the website in four main visible places. They can create a profile and comment on other users' profile pages, they can create or join a group, they can keep a blog or they take part in the discussion boards. In this section, I examine the degree to which users participate in these activities, in order to better understand the types of WonderCafe activities that people prefer.

4.2.1 Create a Profile

All members of WonderCafe have a profile created for them automatically upon joining. The basic profile provides the username, country, age range, gender and time on the website, and new members are also given a generic brown silhouette user profile picture. Members can then choose to personalise and update their information, and may fill in their occupation, write something about themselves (this includes the ability to post videos and pictures, and share links) and update their profile picture to something they feel better represents them. Within my sample, 78% of users had personalized profile pictures and most had updated at least part of their profile. These details can be changed at any point during their time on the website.

User profiles are not simply the place where members display their online persona. They are also places to communicate with other members. Other users can post messages on a member's profile page, which are displayed for everyone to view below their profile itself.

Communication on users profiles is not uncommon but it is not very frequent. Most users had a few things posted on their wall but posts were sporadic.

4.2.2 *Groups*

WonderCafe users can create a group for others to join. A group has its own space in WonderCafe, and features a description of its focus. Members can post on the main group page, or use the group's mini forum to start a discussion or join in one already in progress. Groups are set to be open to anyone, open by application only, or open by invite only. Of the 111 groups on the website, 77 are available for anyone to join.

Groups on WonderCafe cover many topics but the most common are those designed to host discussions for a particular church or pastoral charge within the United Church (31 groups). Other popular categories for groups were places to discuss spirituality (9), showcase photography (7) and discuss books (4).

While there are 111 groups on the website, they are not a significantly popular activity for members on the website, and very few are active. For example, 31 of the groups have only one member and 17 more only had two. In fact, 70% of groups had less than four members. There are a number of more popular groups, the largest with 33 members. However, even among those groups with several members, not all had any actual activity taking place. For example, 66 groups have nothing posted on their wall and 18 only have one thing posted on the wall. This means that over 75% of groups have no, or almost no, activity. The most popular group had 27 discussions on its wall, followed by two with 21, and then one with 12.

The most active group is called “Redhead’s Group.”³² Not only does it have the most members, it also has the most discussions. This group is devoted to a WonderCafe member who has been ill. Members of this group start discussions to post words of encouragement, prayers and updates about this member’s health. The discussions are fairly lively, with many follow-up responses from members. However, there has not been much activity in the group since 2010.

4.2.3 *Blogs*

All members of the website automatically have access to their own blog where they can share thoughts and ideas with other members. The blogs do not seem particularly popular with members of the site, however, beyond those who are United Church clergy. The main page of the blog portal posts all of the 10 most recently updated blogs. Those users whose blogs have been updated are listed on the right side of the page for easy access. Of the 10 most recent blog posts when I checked on June 20th, nine different members were listed. Of these nine members, seven were United Church ministers, two of whom used their blogs to post sermons from the most recent Sunday service, while the other clergy posted about spirituality or events at their church. Further, the United Church moderator keeps her blog on the WonderCafe website. She updates almost once a week, meaning that her presence is very visible on the blogs. While the blogs on WonderCafe have the potential to act as a space for members to express ideas about religion and spirituality, in reality they serve as a place for United Church leadership to share their ideas and more official United Church messages.

³² <http://www.wondercafe.ca/groups/redheads-group>

4.2.4 *Discussion Boards*

The most popular features of the site are the discussion boards. There are eleven forums within these boards for members to take part in. Within a forum, a member can start a topic or post their thoughts on an existing topic. Almost all forums have daily discussion, except the “ad campaign” forum, where the last post was in March, 2010. The other topics are Global Issues, Health and Aging, Parenting, Popular Culture, Relationships, Politics, Religion and Faith, Social, Church Life and Polls, which hosts the discussion area for the weekly poll question.

As of July 21, 2011, there were 13,803 individual topics with 578,581 posts total. The most active boards were the Religion and Faith forum, with 6,704 topics and 230,850 posts, the Social forum with 4,607 topics and 166,813 posts and, quite a distance behind, the Politics forum with 1,346 topics and 38,394 posts. The discussion boards make up the majority of active content on WonderCafe, and as such, they make up the bulk of the material for analysis in this chapter.

4.3 WonderCafe as an Online Community

One important discussion within studies of religion on the internet is whether the gatherings of people on the internet can be understood as a community. When surveyed for the United Church’s 40th General Council, the majority of users saw WonderCafe as a “genuine community” (United Church 2009c, 803). Lorne Dawson (2004) identifies six factors that can help distinguish between a meaningful internet community and a collection of people communicating with each other online: interactivity, stability of membership, stability of identity, netizenship and social control, personal concern and the occurrence in public space. The importance of making this distinction is that an online community provides

a certain amount of stability and cohesion among members that would not be the case were it not a community. It also means that users may see themselves as part of the collective WonderCafe community, rather than as individual, independent users communicating from different locations. Most importantly, if a community exists, then we are left with the possibility that members are able to create their own norms and spiritual expressions acceptable within the community. It gives more possibility for creation as a community, and also means that it may host potentially new and online-only religious activity. Therefore, the question, is WonderCafe an internet community?

4.3.1 *Interactivity*

Interactivity measures the ability for members to communicate with each other, especially on a horizontal, many-to-many, level (Dawson 2004, 76). Members of WonderCafe are able to communicate with each other on many different platforms. They can post messages on each others' profiles, send 'wondermails' and discuss ideas on a group. Further, blog postings, where a user can write in a one-to-many fashion, can be commented on by other users. The most interactive feature, which is also the most popular, is the discussion board area. In this place, users can ask questions, post their opinions and communicate with other users without significant restrictions.

Users on the discussion boards have the opportunity to discuss topics in a many-to-many fashion. While one user starts a topic, any user can add their own post and represent their own opinion. While there are many United Church clergy on the discussion boards, they do not always have a privileged position, and other members may challenge what they write. For example, one United Church minister uses the Religion and Faith forum weekly for advice on his upcoming sermon. In response to one of his posts, another user asked,

“Does your congregation know you're forcing us to write your sermons?” (Graeme). This user then went on to offer advice about sermon topics, and was joined by other users who offered further ideas. Conversations on the discussion boards almost always have some level of back and forth between users, even if some of these members are working for the United Church.³³

4.3.2 *Stability of Membership*

For there to be stability of membership in a group, users must participate over an extended period of time. This factor seeks to assess whether members take part in the website for a long time or whether they pop in for a short time and then lose interest. The fact that 47% of members in my sample of members have been members of the site for at least four years indicates that many people remain as members for quite a while.

4.3.3 *Stability of Identity*

Stability of identity is perhaps the most complicated of the factors to determine. On the internet, it is easy for users to create a persona that does not represent who they are offline, or to create multiple personas. Stability of membership measures the degree to which users stay within one identity and the degree to which they change identities. The fact that 47% of my sample had been members of WonderCafe for at least four years indicates that these users have stayed on the website for quite a while acting under the same profile. Users can, however, change their username. I noticed twice while reading older posts on WonderCafe that users at times replied to or quoted other users using different usernames than those currently listed with their accounts. This is not a change that users can arbitrarily

³³ It is very unusual for there to only be one post on a topic.

make and likely requires a request to one of the administrators. I noticed this in two situations. In the first, one of the website administrators now uses his full name, rather than his original username “admin 2.” In the second, a user whose online name used to be StevieG is now SG. I also found one profile where a user began by explaining that while this was a new profile, the user had had a profile under a different name in the past.

From what I can discern as a member of the public visiting the public sections of this site, users appear to be very transparent about changes to their profiles. I did, however, find two examples of users potentially using multiple accounts. The first was in a thread where one user was offering updates about the child abuse scandal in the Catholic Church that started last year. This topic was somewhat inflammatory, under the title “The Fall of the Pope”, and the user who started it has been updating it at least weekly since April 2010. In February 2011, an argument started between three of the users, and the thread starter and an atheist member of the website were accused of being anti-Catholic and irrational by the third user. The atheist member in turn accused this person of having multiple accounts on WonderCafe, and the thread starter chimed in: “At last count, he has had at least 10 other names. With which he has used to belittle people. His remarks are solely made to inflame and tear down the community on Wondercafe” (Alex). There was no evidence brought forward that I saw to prove that this user had in fact created multiple accounts, which may be the reason the argument ended at this point. It is also possible that this was handled privately, among site administrators. Certainly, this type of behaviour is something that users are worried about.

A more concrete example is the case of a user who was operating under two different accounts. I found the case from April of 2010 where a user, Namaste, had been operating on the website under two different personas. The fake persona, MusicalMcKenzie, had shared

her stories of unexpected pregnancies, marriage and post-partum depression on the website. In April 2010, Namaste revealed to the users of the site that MusicalMcKenzie had committed suicide. The administrators of WonderCafe noticed that the two accounts were operating from the same IP address and investigated. Namaste left WonderCafe but sent a letter to one of the administrators, asking for it to be posted online. The letter began:

Just over a month has passed since you found out that I had control of two accounts here. I would like to offer a most sincere, heartfelt apology. I feel terrible about what I have done. Wondercafe has been a wonderful, supportive community for me and I abused my privileges here. While I did not set out to purposely mislead or hurt anyone, I know that I have. Each and every single one of you will have been affected by my actions in some way. I know that I have hurt some of you deeply. I am so very sorry. That was never my intention. What happened was the result of a great deal of grief and pain that I hadn't dealt with in an appropriate way. (Nameste).

Other users responding to this letter displayed significant anger, and commented on their feelings of being taken advantage of. An argument actually broke out over whether or not they should forgive Nameste. One user wrote about how manipulated she felt:

My big issue is from the above quote... it speaks to intent. To say that Namaste did not deliberately set out to mislead is just not true. She sought me out after I had commented on a McKenzie post as McKenzie and then asked me to contact her friend Namaste because she was worried about her. So I began to talk with Namaste and she initiated and maintained two distinct relationships.

I can, at some level, accept that this stuff happens online but something happened for me when it came off-line and into my life. Namaste called me on the phone to talk about being worried about McKenzie and the baby, etc. Namaste called me to tell me that McKenzie had tried to commit suicide. Namaste called me to tell me that McKenzie had died. And she listened to my shock and my tears... She deliberately manipulated my emotions and my good faith... (gaiagrll)

This example shows not only how easy it is to manipulate a profile and create a persona online, but also the depth of feeling among WonderCafe members. This was a very difficult event for those who had to deal with the fact that they had become attached to a persona that had not been real. In the Health and Aging forum, many threads that started around the time

of the event featured users expressing how upset they were.

While these two examples illustrate a level of distrust about online identities, I think that in the case of WonderCafe, the exceptions prove the rule and the level of anger from other members indicates that the majority of users actually keep one identity online and operate under it. In a text and image-based online environment, there is always the opportunity for users to take advantage of their anonymity, but this does not mean that this happens often.

Finally, one way to note stability of identity is through the use of profile pictures, which make users more easily visually recognisable.³⁴ In my sample, 77.5% had a profile picture.

4.3.4 Netizenship and Social Control

Netizenship and social control measure those social controls on websites that have developed to guide behaviour. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, the WonderCafe website has a set of formal guidelines for behaviour. Further, the website is moderated, with administrators who users can contact if they have complaints and who can ban users or delete inappropriate posts. WonderCafe is not, however, so actively moderated that users must have their posts approved before they appear on the discussion boards, and much of the social maintenance of the site falls into the hands of other users. The administrators of the website encourage members to take some control of keeping track of unfriendly behaviour. An examples of this is shown under the frequently asked questions:

³⁴ It should be acknowledged that users can change their profile pictures without too much effort. But I don't have any data on how frequently users change their pictures. I do have as an example one user who has the word heart in her username. I noticed that her profile picture had changed since I've been looking on the site but it always had a heart in the profile.

Someone on WonderCafe is bugging/harassing/threatening me - what can I do about it?

The best thing to do if and when you encounter such a situation is simply ignore them... 99.9% of the time they will soon leave you alone. By NOT responding to offending user (i.e., NOT giving them any attention, NOT letting them get a "rise" out of you), most people will simply go away. Annoying people get bored very fast when you don't allow them to annoy you. If the problem persists, contact the WonderCafe administrator and the person will be removed permanently from the site. If you feel that you have been threatened in any way, contact your local law enforcement. (WonderCafe "FAQ")

This gives users not only suggestions related to online behaviour, but also a place to go when behaviour is particularly inappropriate.

Additionally, users play a big role in letting others know what is and is not appropriate behaviour. They frequently let other users know when they think that someone has posted something inappropriate. For example, to return to the fight on the "Fall of the Pope" topic, a user tried to intervene and wrote

chansen and AbrahamMartin, I regret that you two have chosen to attack each other. I realize that I am regularly out of Wondercafe for extended periods of time, so am unaware of your past history. This thread was started by Alex out of his concerns over some past actions by the hierarchy in the Catholic Church related to the sexual abuse of children by priests... Considering the seriousness of the issue, I am disappointed that you have chosen to engage in these personal attacks on each other. I know you both are capable of better posts. (Jim Kenney).

As another example, on a thread discussing whether or not the Catholic Church is Christian, one user called out another for inappropriate behaviour. "MC, I would say that your comment on the other thread is very close to violating the terms of conduct" (GordW).

WonderCafe has its own guidelines for maintaining a friendly environment for discussion, but the users also play a big role in making sure that everyone is acting within the guidelines of what they all consider to be appropriate behaviour on the website.

4.3.5 Personal Concern

Users of WonderCafe show personal concern for each other. There are a number of examples of this on WonderCafe. I mentioned above that the most popular group on WonderCafe is “Redhead’s Group” where members come together to offer support to a member who has been struggling with illness. The discussions within the group indicate that a number of members visited Redhead in the hospital and one of the WonderCafe members is taking care of her cats while she is ill.

Another example is the discussions that take place on the Health and Aging Forum. On this forum, users discuss health problems they have been having and ask for advice on topics such as what supplements might help them to sleep or how to unclog ears. On a more serious level, users also discuss health issues in their personal lives and within the lives of their families, and ask other members for their prayers. Similar discussions also happen in the parenting forum, where participants ask for advice about issues they are having as parents.

A final example is the case of one user who, after being a member of the website for five years, posted to say goodbye because her ex-partner had started stalking her activities online on WonderCafe. Members who responded to the post were very upset to see one of their friends leave, but they offered their support and hoped that she would be able to get back online again.

4.3.6 Occurrence in Public Space

The final factor for determining the presence of an internet community is the occurrence in public space. WonderCafe was advertised online and offline to draw members onto the website. Further, user activity, except for ‘wondermails’, takes place in an area that

is visible to all visitors of the website, whether or not they are members. This means that potential members can visit WonderCafe to decide whether the activities are appealing to them before they decide to join.

4.3.7 *Summary*

Based on Dawson's (2004) criteria, the WonderCafe website is an excellent example of a stable internet community. Two additional points support the conclusion that this is a stable internet community. First, the activity on WonderCafe happens only online. There are users who attend the same United Church or who know each other offline, but the majority of activity among members happens in this online environment. This is an important factor for an online community. In Douglas Cowan's (2005) study of Internet use among neo-Pagans, he finds that many active online communities are actually an online discussion space for an active offline community of Pagans who perform rituals together offline. This is an important distinction, and in the case of WonderCafe, most user activity does not have this offline component.

Second, the people contributing to WonderCafe often develop insider terms and nicknames for each other, which might be difficult for outsiders to understand. For example, in reading through content on the discussion boards, I found that it was sometimes challenging to figure out who comments were directed towards because a number of users had nicknames for each other. These nicknames were usually an abbreviation for a username, but they also appear at times to be the real name of the person.

Users also have ways of writing that are specific to the internet. There are many discussions about users "derailing" a topic, that is posting a comment that is off topic or that takes the thread in a different direction. Users apologize for "derailing" a topic or accusing

other users of “derailing.” A similar example is the word “sockpuppet”, which is a term for an account that was created by a member on WonderCafe so that the user can have a second, or “sockpuppet”, account to support the commentary and discussion generated through the first one. Another example is that when users offer support, they give each other virtual hugs, which look like this: (((((username)))))). This shows support to another user in an environment in which they cannot actually reach out and offer a hug.

Thus, WonderCafe should be understood as an online religious community. Member interact over a long period of time, have personal concern for each other, maintain relationships with each other and enforce certain rules for behaviour online. The users on WonderCafe feel as though they are part of an online community. This is important because it means that even if WonderCafe does not reflect the mission it set out to accomplish at the beginning of the website, it has still created an online-only space for users to interact. Internet technology that allows asynchronous communication over an extended time period allows people to connect across Canada. Much as the internet is used to connect diaspora communities to the homeland (Helland 2007), WonderCafe provides space for users to create a community and a shared identity as WonderCafe members that spans this country.

4.4 Properties of Space in User Activity on WonderCafe

A spatial analysis of WonderCafe may appear a bit strange since a website is not physical space. However, a spatial analysis of user activity offers a method of illustrating the ways in which WonderCafe is, and also is not, like physical space. Spatial analysis also allows one to explore at a deeper level how people use WonderCafe, and whether this makes it a space for spiritual exploration, for discussions of United Church topics, or something

completely different. The following section examines the four properties of space, configuration, simultaneity, extension and power, in the context of WonderCafe.

4.4.1 *Configuration*

The configuration of space highlights the fact that one space may be interpreted and understood in different ways by the people who interact within it, and the space therefore brings together all of these interpretations as a physical space (Knott 2005, 22). This is also described as the ways spaces gather (Knott 2009,156). In the case of WonderCafe, I would propose that this can be applied to the different ways in which members use the site. From my research, there appears to be four different spaces that users have created within WonderCafe. These are: a space for spiritual exploration, a space for the United Church, a space for support, and a space for friendship.

4.4.1.1 Space for Spiritual Exploration

Members of WonderCafe clearly use this space for spiritual exploration. The Religion and Faith forum is the most active forum, with users participating in wide-ranging discussions there. Of the topics on the Religion and Faith board that I recorded, only five of twenty-five were United-Church-focused. This means that users are able to explore religious and spiritual questions that extend beyond the United Church's official concerns. For example, among the more popular topics I examined was one called "Predicting the beginning of the reign of GOD: is it possible?" This topic was started by a United Church minister but he was talking to others about the predictions made by Harold Camping that the end of the world would happen on May 21, 2011. After explaining the story and providing his opinion about it, he wrote

With the above in mind, and in the spirit of having a dialogue: I am very interested in knowing: Who among you already feel you have affirmed the reign of GOD--or whatever designation one cares to use--in your lives? If not, who are willing to give the whole idea some thought? Who among you think the whole idea is a silly one, a waste of time and not worth contemplating? Perhaps some of you--atheists and/or agnostics perhaps--have a different or even a better idea. Such will be welcome. Feel free to give voice to them. Perhaps thinking about this stimulates all kinds of questions? Again, such will be welcome. (RevLGKing)

Although this thread is not as popular as some threads, seven users, including two Atheists, took part in the discussions and discussed they how they understood the possibility of the reign of God. Everyone was respectful of other users' comments, and while people disagreed, there were no personal attacks.

In another thread, a member posted a news article about a Quebec priest who was performing exorcisms, and asked the community, "I know some abuse this, others don't believe, and yet again others simply think everyone is possessed and need this done. In the bible Jesus removed demons, there are also documented cases like Emily Rose & the Exorcists. What do you think? Has anyone experienced such things?" (Blackbelt). This discussion took off between eight members, including United Church members, an Atheist, a Pagan and some undisclosed Christians.

A more heated example happened on a thread started by a United Church member about whether or not the Catholic Church is Christian. This user started the topic because of claims on another thread that Catholics were not Christian. What followed was an interesting discussion among members on what one needs to do to be Christian. The majority of the discussion was between a user who was Baptist and said Catholics should not be considered Christian, and a range of other users who said that they should be, although for differing reasons. There was a significant variety of religious backgrounds in this discussion, with United Church members, Baptists, one Catholic, one Muslim, one Pagan and one Wiccan.

One topic that sums up this emphasis on spiritual exploration is a discussion started by a user who describes themselves as “belonging to all religions, or none.” The topic started with the post “Many people these days define themselves as "spiritual but not religious." What is "spirituality" to you? Is it a feeling, a conviction, a belief in a ghostly or immaterial dimension? Or is it the belief in a particular belief system? How do you define "spirituality," and what is your personal spirituality?” (Arminius). Many users joined in to explain how they understood spirituality. No United Church clergy took part in this topic but there were a number of United Church members, as well as a Baptist, a Roman Catholic, an Atheist, a Pagan and a Muslim.

What is important about these examples is that users, even in the presence of United Church clergy, are able to engage in religious and spiritual topics away from the United Church. They can express their ideas about religion that might be considered a bit different. If users want to explore spirituality, they are free to do so.

4.4.1.2 Space for the United Church

While users may be able to express their ideas about spirituality from many different perspectives, the presence of the United Church cannot be ignored. While the Religion and Faith discussion board may not be dominated by the United Church, there certainly are United-Church-centric posts. Of the 25 topics I recorded from this forum, three posts were asking advice for sermons being written for United Church services, two from a minister and one from a United Church member who had been asked to offer a sermon. Users willingly gave advice about the directions that these sermons could take.

By contrast, the blogs on WonderCafe feature a significant focus on the United Church. In addition to the almost-weekly blog by the United Church moderator, almost all

blogs are by United Church ministers posting sermons, reflecting on their faith or updating users about events at their church.

The Church Life section of the forums is also very United-Church-focused, and of the 25 posts I recorded, 19 were about the United Church. These topics included updates about the United Church benefits centre for United Church ministers and updates about the new United Church manual. Other topics ask for advice about making ethical investments with the United Church, how the essential agreement in the United Church should be interpreted, and whether or not members of congregations should be friends with United Church ministers. Those taking part in these conversations are almost exclusively United Church members.

An example of Church business on this website comes from a member whose congregation was deciding on a new Minister after being without one for a year. This user expresses frustration that the members of the selection committee only know the gender and the relative age of the candidate. The user wrote

I think I know why: they don't want people to Google or Facebook the person, and they don't want us to be phoning the last church to find out information about the person. The search committee does not want us to prejudice our vote.

I can understand that, but at the same time it's hard to vote for someone when you're not allowed to know their name, or meet them, or watch a video of a worship service they're leading.

Can't the lack of information also prejudice a vote?

Why not just do the settlement option, instead of having a congregational vote at all?

Has anyone else had to vote for a mystery minister? (GO_3838).

The replies almost all came from United Church clergy, who wrote that this is the United Church process and quoted the United Church manual to show that it is standard procedure. The responses pointed out that this user had already received more information than they were supposed to have, because they knew the gender and approximate age of the minister.

During this conversation, one user offered their experience in their Baptist church, whose hiring process is quite different. A United Church member responded with

Why are you here Morning Calm (Jae)? Is it to disrespect the women who are called to ministry in The United Church of Canada? I know your tradition is only MEN in the pulpit but we seem to be more forward thinking. - (CrazyHeart bangs head on keyboard, Why is she drawn into this nonsense every time?) (CrazyHeart).

This comment indicated to this user that they were not welcome in this United Church conversation topic as they were just frustrating people.

Thus, if users wish to find space to discuss the United Church, there is certainly space on WonderCafe for them to do so. There is also a strong presence of United Church members, who are able to talk about United Church practices and other matters, including congregational decisions. Thus, WonderCafe is a space for United Church members and clergy to discuss church-specific issues that are important to them and other members.

4.4.1.3 Space for Support

Users of WonderCafe also use the website as a place to find support. Users do not seem to join WonderCafe with the intent of finding support but after becoming a member, they form connections with members of the community, and when issues arise in their life, WonderCafe is one of the places to which they turn. This can be demonstrated in Redhead's group. In this case, Redhead did not create the group, but when she became ill one of her friends on the website created a space for other users to offer support. Further, Redhead had formed enough bonds with users online that members visited her in hospital and took care of her cats.

The Health and Aging forum appears to have become the home to many of these support networks. When I recorded the topics on the Health and Aging forum, I found that

nine of the 25 posts were spaces where users either asked for support from the community or shared stories and received support for the community. These ranged from one member complaining that she had been sick and her ear was clogged, to which members offered advice about how to unclog it, to another member who had been diagnosed with an autoimmune disease and was struggling with the treatment.

The support within the community extends beyond offering support to members who are struggling with health issues to include difficulties parenting and in relationships. For example, one member turned to the community when she was feeling that she never got any recognition for the work that she did as a mom. Other users offered support, gave advice and shared their stories of parenting. Another user went to WonderCafe to express his frustration that all his male friends had moved away, and in return, the community offered support and advice about making other friends.

Thus, WonderCafe also has a secondary function as being a place for member to share the struggles in their lives and to get support and advice from the community. Many of the members who bring up issues in their lives and ask for support or advice are those users who have been members for a while and are highly involved in the community, thus people may not join the community for this but once they have been a member for a little while, they find support from each other.

4.4.1.4 Space for Friendship

WonderCafe also becomes a space for users to share stories and have fun with their friends. As with being a space for support, this is a secondary feature of the website, and comes into play in a number of ways in user interactions, as users share stories with members of the community and play games with each other online.

Users turn to WonderCafe to share good news within their lives with other members. For example, after one user was married and returned from her honeymoon, she shared the news with the other users of WonderCafe, who all offered their congratulations. In another case, in a topic called “Personal good news! It is not politics but I mostly post here...” a user shared with the community that her daughter had passed her final exams and had become a fellow of the Royal Society of Surgeons in Canada. Other users responded by offering their congratulations for this accomplishment.

The second example of friendship relates to the games that users play with each other on WonderCafe. The Social forum is home to a number of these, for example, the longest ongoing game, the Last Post Thread, which began in November 2009. Members try to be the last to post on the thread, and tease each other about no longer being the last to post a comment. A second game is called Fetch, in which users request other members to find an item; the next user to post must attach an image of the requested item before a new request can be made. People at WonderCafe have been playing this game since September 2010, and requests have ranged from finding the world’s smallest apartment, to someone you admire, to a hat with a star on it.

A final example of the way WonderCafe offers a space for friendship is illustrated by a December 2010 post in which a user started a topic describing WonderCafe as though it were Union Station. She wrote:

Wondercafe is a busy place. Kind of like a Union Station....a hub of activity with people coming and going all the time. I'm a people watcher and love to sit in a place like a train station marveling [sic] at all the different types of people that I see and imagining what their lives are like.

Wondercafe offers us even more. Here we get to see and meet all kinds of people but even better yet we are offered glimpses into their lives. They share life's joys, questions, celebrations, disappointments, worries, ambitions, concerns [sic] and even share in their time of loneliness and grief. And in this place, where people are busy,

and people are coming and going, we do what few people do in the real world. We stop and listen. We reach out. And hopefully we help one another.

In some corners of the room people [sic] it may get noisy as people banter back and forth. In other corners of the room it is much quieter, as people not only listen, but they reflect and carefully choose their responses to the person in crisis. In some areas of the room we ponder life's big questions. Other areas of the room are silly and often resemble a party of one type or another. So many people, so many different lives, all carrying different things in their suitcases, and THIS UNION station offers room for all.

In another thread posters were remembering that there are many here missing loved ones this Christmas. While many celebrate Christmas with decorations, parties, shopping trips and anticipation of a full house...others are wondering what this Christmas will mean with an empty chair. Some are looking towards Christmas wondering where they will be, who they will be with or who they might be without. Some who visit here don't believe in Christmas. So how do you decorate the Union Station?

I am opening the doors wide in this thread. The room is big, the room is inviting, the room is warm.....there is room for all. Enter in and bring with you whatever you like....you may add decorations to fill the space, you may offer food to nourish others, you may bring only yourself and tell us how you're doing. You are welcome here. I'll be happy to see you and sit for a while. Please continue to welcome others as they enter in and if I'm not in sight, please tend to their needs. This is a busy union station of people coming and going. Let's make sure that everyone is recognized and that their needs are met. If they are happy, let's share in their joy. If they are sad, let's offer them an ear, a hug and a caring heart. If they are lost, let's offer them hope that they'll find their way and perhaps some guidance. If they are hungry, let's feed them.

There is room for all.

Welcome. (busymom)

Response from users to this post was huge and continues today. At the beginning, users role-played that they were in Union Station and described what they would be doing in the station, for example, making perogies for everyone. After everyone stopped role-playing, the topic turned into a friendly discussion in which users talked about their days.

WonderCafe has become a space where users have formed bonds with each other and are friends. Connections have spread off-site from WonderCafe and into the real lives of

users. They share their struggles but also the happy moments in their lives. They do not just come to WonderCafe to talk about religion and spirituality, but also to play games and communicate with their friends.

4.4.1.5 Summary

The users of WonderCafe take advantage of the website for spiritual exploration as well as for sharing thoughts about United Church activities and campaigns. The website, however, becomes significantly more important to users as they form bonds with each other over the internet, bonds that in some cases extend beyond their online lives and into the offline world. The WonderCafe space is used to share the good and bad moments in life. Because users can choose where and how to interact on the website, WonderCafe becomes a very different space for each individual user.

4.4.2 *Extension*

While configuration illustrates the ways that a space becomes host to many different interpretations, another important element of the spatial dimension of WonderCafe is the way in which it changes over time, or extension. By studying the diachronic extension, one can gain a better understanding of how the space changes over time. Knott writes, “Extension conveys the sense of time flowing through space as well as the way in which places contain within them the traces of earlier times and regimes” (2009, 156). Ways that the website has changed over time are discussed in the past chapter, and therefore I examine now how user content changes over time. Almost everything on the discussion boards stays public and visible for any visitors to read. There are, however, three changes that are visible on the WonderCafe forums: the ability to change profile pictures, the ease of topics getting buried

on the discussion boards, and the impact that account deletion on WonderCafe has for ongoing online discussion.

4.4.2.1 User Profile Pictures

The users of WonderCafe are assigned an initial profile picture that features an image of a dark brown silhouette on a light brown background. Users can easily upload any other picture to replace this default image, and they can change their image as often as they wish. I found while reading the discussion boards that user pictures were an easy way to quickly identify who was participating in a post. There are a number of users who did not change their pictures over the time I have been looking at this website. There are also a few who have kept the same image for a number of years. However, many change their image sporadically, while others seem to have a new image every week. One user who changes her profile picture often always ensures it incorporates a heart, which makes it easy to pick this user out when she changes her picture. The profile picture is the most visual representation of each user; thus, it is important that users are able to change it as they see fit. The ways that users change their profile pictures over time demonstrates the level of interactivity on the site. I highlight an example that illustrates both related strengths and tensions on WonderCafe.

One June 24th, 2011, one of the users on WonderCafe suggested that WonderCafe needed to have a pride celebration and that users should change their avatars to rainbow colours. I had not seen the original post and after I began to notice that more and more users had rainbows in their profile, it was interesting to learn that the users of the website had grouped together to plan this event. It shows that many users on WonderCafe support the LGBT community and came together to offer a visual representation of this.

During this spontaneous celebration, controversy erupted when one of the members started to use a profile picture with a male and female stick figure with the words “Straight Pride” written on the image. Another user started a new topic to call this user out on the image; she wrote,

I noticed that one of the wondercafe members has an image for their profile with a stick man/woman holding hands and the words straight pride".

That image is offensive to me.

Why?

It so points to someone not getting it, that every frickin' minute is straight pride day in most of global society.

It ignores why gay pride is so essential to a society learning to be welcoming. That abuse and murder still occur due to a lack of safety for those who are not gay. That the ability to kiss or hold hands is so denied.

...

I will direct the person to this thread, so that they can add their reason for choosing. I am not naming them, in case it was a moment of weakness and they are going to change it. (Pinga).

The user with this avatar responded with, “Really I think any time someone is silenced for being proud of who they were created to be, it's a sad, sad day” (MorningCalm, 26/06/2011). This, in turn, led to an at-times tense conversation between members of WonderCafe as they expressed their opinion over the avatar issue.

In my original data coding I had missed the original Straight Pride profile picture, which must have been removed fairly quickly after the debate started. Reading the topic about Straight Pride was strange without seeing the avatar the users were complaining about. At the same time, the WonderCafe Pride topic itself was odd to read, because so many regular users had changed their images to something else. What this shows is that

interactions on WonderCafe really do take place in the time that the activity is taking place. While there is a record of all activity, the speed at which users can change profile pictures shows how topics may quickly become irrelevant.

4.4.2.2 Discussion Board Topic

The speed of change on WonderCafe is illustrated to a much greater degree through an examination of the discussion boards in general. Each forum lists the most recent 25 topics on the first page. These are the topics that have had the most recent responses. This means that topics that are not generating feedback from other users disappear from the main page, and once posts are gone from there, they are less likely to be responded to by other members. One consequence is that the topics posted in less popular forums actually have a longer time over which they are discussed. As an example, the main page of the Parenting forum still includes topics from February on its main page. Thus, topics on this forum that get user attention will stay visible for quite some time, unlike the far more active Religion and Faith Board, where the oldest post is usually only a week old. This means that less frequent visitors may miss discussions that catch the attention of members for only a week.

Tied into this is the fact that users often reference past activity on their posts. They quote users' comments on other topics, refer to discussions that they had with others in the past, and at times, when a newer user brings up an idea that has already been explored, tell the user that members had already dealt with this topic in the past.

What this shows is that the WonderCafe website is dynamic. Not only are discussions on the forums fast moving and quickly updated and changed, but users also retain a memory of past discussions.

4.4.2.3 Missing posts on WonderCafe

Sometimes the conversations in WonderCafe become very heated and a user posts something that is deemed so offensive by the site administrators that the post will be deleted. If a member has consistently been causing problems on WonderCafe, that user's account is also deleted, as are all of their previous posts on the site. The result is that at times, particularly in very heated discussions, members will refer to something a member posted that has since been deleted, which results in somewhat confusing reading for people encountering the topic after the fact. For example, I was reading through a thread about the conflict in Israel and Palestine, a frequent topic for tense debates, and the tone had already shifted to insulting asides in the conversation when suddenly there was a further shift, defending one user's actions and chiding another for offensive comments. As the offending comment had been deleted, this was puzzling until a later user quoted it and I figured out what had been going on.

While I examined the topics on the Politics forum, I noticed that users often complained about posts by a user called beshpin. I later realized that all the posts by this user had been deleted because this user has been banned. Missing members—and posts—can give some of the discussions on WonderCafe a disjointed feeling.

4.4.2.4 Summary

While the content of the discussion boards is archived and remains accessible, activities on the website should really be understood as happening in the present. They are dynamic and can change even in a short time; given that many discussions continue for multiple days, there are significant benefits for those members who follow and understand

them as they are written. This leads to a consideration of the ways in which the space of WonderCafe also connects to other spaces outside of the website.

4.4.3 *Simultaneity*

Simultaneity is the idea that space also links to other space at the same time. Knott writes “But there are also synchronic interconnections with other sites, both those that are similar in kind and those real and imagined co-existing sites to which our place is connected by the movement of people and capital, the flow of communications and ideas” (2009, 156). I discussed in the previous chapter how the WonderCafe website links to other websites. However, in this section, I want to examine how users of WonderCafe link to other discussion and places in their conversation online.

First I examine my data from the discussion boards. I recorded 225 topics and categorized the data. I sorted this data by number of times the category came up on the discussion boards and the number of posts in total for each topic. This sorting highlighted how WonderCafe connects to other issues. I focus my discussion on three popular topics in the forums: personal lives, the United Church and global politics.

4.4.3.1 Discussion boards

With use, WonderCafe clearly becomes a place where members discuss their offline lives, and every single forum had at least one thread about a member’s personal life. Of my sample of 225 topics, 67 were devoted to sharing these personal stories, which comprise about 30% of all conversations in my sample on WonderCafe. These topics engendered a total of 1,639 posts, which ranged from sharing information about health issues and asking for advice, to expressing frustrations with parenting a teenager and posting pictures from a

user's garden. Personal discussions dominate WonderCafe, which shows that while its users interact online and play games with each other, they are also connecting through their offline lives. WonderCafe becomes a space to share enjoyable and difficult experiences, which means that while members may interact anonymously, they are not keeping their offline lives separate from WonderCafe. This should not be surprising; many members have interacted on WonderCafe over a long period of time and have formed personal bonds with other members. Thus, it makes sense that WonderCafe would become a place to connect their lives together.

The second most popular area of discussion is about the United Church.³⁵ Unlike personal conversations, United Church discussions do not find their way onto every forum, and instead, the majority take place on the Church Life forum. I recorded 27 United Church related discussions, making up 12% of discussion in my sample and including 925 posts. These discussions range from questions about how different congregations are structured and how Churches can make ethical investments, to advice about Sunday sermons. This focus illustrates that the United Church presence is very real on WonderCafe and points out that WonderCafe content is very often connected back to the United Church. It also highlights the dominance of United Church members online.

The third most popular area relates to global politics. As with Church issues, these discussions are also not located on all areas of the forum but remain concentrated on two forums, in this case, Global Issues and Politics. I recorded 17 discussions and 520 posts, making up 8% of these posts. In these discussions, users discuss topics ranging from Libya and the NewsCorp scandal to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Discussions in this area are some

³⁵ Conversations about the United Church often include personal stories about members' own experiences with the United Church.

of the most heated on WonderCafe. This is especially the case with respect to discussions about Israel and Palestine, and five of the Global Politics threads are devoted to this topic. This should not be surprising as this is an area that the United Church itself has become involved in. The wide range of comments shows that users expand their discussions far into global political issues, which illustrates the degree to which WonderCafe has a significantly extended focus.

4.4.3.3 Summary

User activity on WonderCafe connects with news, discussion, and ideas far beyond the website itself. Unsurprisingly, it also connects strongly to the United Church of Canada, with many discussions that focus on the United Church and United Church congregations. Far more prevalent, however, are discussions about members' personal lives, which show that WonderCafe has become a place for users to connect over the important and difficult moments in their lives. The fact that this is such a dominant theme means that users have moved far beyond seeing this website as a place for only spiritual discussion or for the United Church, and have instead created their own space to share the personal issues that matter most to them. Additionally, members use WonderCafe to connect to global issues that they are concerned about.

4.4.4 *Power*

Power is an important dimension of spatial analysis. Knott writes "Whether through its historical seams, simultaneous interconnections or the struggles that produce it or take place within it, power inhabits space (2009, 156). Knott argues that power struggles are always played out in space. She writes that "the spaces that religion occupies and participates

in are space of power” (2005, 28). In the previous chapter, I discussed how struggles of power can be seen in the messages of WonderCafe as a place for spiritual exploration versus a space for the United Church. Earlier discussions in this chapter have shown how much more complicated these power dynamics become when users are added to the picture. Users of WonderCafe have carved out spaces in the website that allow for activities that are completely outside of either spiritual exploration or the United Church. WonderCafe also gives space for users to challenge the decisions of the United Church and WonderCafe itself. This section explores response by WonderCafe members to the Spirit Express project as a way to demonstrate some of the subversive powers that WonderCafe gives to its members.

The Spirit Express campaign, discussed in the previous chapter, was an environmental campaign under which the United Church moderator traveled across Canada to talk to congregations about environmental projects. The campaign was launched on WonderCafe with a post on the Church Life forum about the project. Subsequent user feedback was mixed. Some members came out in support of the project, pointing out that environmentalism may be the future for the United Church and is an important cause, but other members were particularly unhappy with the project. In the second post on the page, a user wrote:

Our Moderator seems more concerned with the environment than the future of the UCC. This spring there were major decisions being made by the General Council to cut programs and staff, and we were told it was not possible to hold consultations with Presbyteries or Conferences. The Moderator was invisible in all of those discussions. Now the Moderator is travelling across the country by train to raise awareness about the environment (RevJamesMurray).

As a follow up he wrote,

I am all for us being a voice for the environment. I just feel frustrated that the moderator only speaks about that topic, and remains silent while our denomination is going through some profound shifts in structure and direction. Can she not speak on

both? Can she not integrate the two? Does her ecological theology not have an ecclesiology? Or does her silence say she doesn't care about worshipping communities of faith? (RevJamesMurray)

Thus, the campaign was immediately challenged by a United Church clergy member who thought that the priorities of the church were misplaced. Other members of the community also took sides on the issue, and while some preferred the focus to be on the environment, others sympathized with RevJamesMurray. This conflict shows that a significant tension exists in the United Church among members of the clergy as the United Church tries to find its direction for the future.

Another argument broke out over this issue when someone realized that the moderator's town hall meetings were only being held between Northern Ontario and Alberta. This user was concerned that other parts of the country were being left out. Another member agreed, pointing out that many parts of Canada are not accessible by train.

I don't expect to hear or see Mardi in her quest. There hasn't been a train out of Owen Sound since 1995 and a passenger train since 1990. The tracks were torn up fifteen years ago, as a result of abandonment orders. There is a lot of Canada like that... (DKS)

One user agreed and wrote

I can say the same here. While it is very nice that the moderator is travelling by train across Canada, Edmonton to northern Ontario is only a small part of Canada. What about the rest? What about those areas not serviced by train? She could hop a freight train and cover this area..... (Northwind).

This discussion highlights the feeling of many United Church members that some parts of the country receive more attention than others. It also demonstrates tensions within the United Church about representation across such a large country.

In the midst of these discussions among users, Moderator Tindal entered the fray to offer some clarification. She began with several statements about community and acknowledged some of the tensions about the direction for the United Church on this topic without naming them or taking sides. She did, however, become involved in the discussion about how much time she was spending in each United Church conference, at which time she pointed out that she spent at least six days in every one. Part of the role of Moderator is to travel between conferences, she said, and this year's train travel was a possible and more environmentally friendly option.

However, Tindal sparked another controversy when she wrote that

I should acknowledge here that VIA has graciously contributed the cost of this train travel, so the church is actually spending fewer dollars than it would with other forms of travel – but I'm not sure that the dollar cost is the most important point. I think we will all have to learn more about the true costing of travel and other human activities, once we take into account the toll on God's Earth. Some things that look like bargains today will turn out to have been foolishly wasteful tomorrow. (Moderator Mardi Tindal).

Many members were not happy that travel was provided by Via Rail. Some users questioned whether or not it was a wise decision for the United Church to accept corporate gifts and sponsorships. The user MorningCalm became particularly upset, apparently because he thought that Via Rail was showing favouritism to the United Church over his church. He further argued that as Via rail received government funding, they should not be providing services to churches because it that becomes a burden for tax payers. He wrote

Moderator, are you indeed travelling on the Canadian taxpayer's dime (and if so, how do you sleep at night)? Are you travelling [sic] first class? Do you travel at night by coach with the common folk or do you prefer to be with the elite in the sleeping car? Are your meals from the snack car or the dining car? Do you think you are effectively building church community if you are isolating yourself from the common people for the sake of heightened luxury? What would Jesus do if he were in your place, Moderator? (MorningCalm).

Other members of the website reacted quickly to this, pointing out that he was not being civil. Still others began arguing amongst themselves over whether Via Rail should be providing the cost for the train travel. Overall, most users agreed that this member should take up the issue with Via, rather than with the United Church, and he agreed to step out of the conversation until he heard from the railway company. He later apologized to other users on the thread, saying that he had been rude and not a good ambassador for his faith. This discussion illustrates not only the tensions around funding for the United Church projects, but also those between members of this website.

This incident also highlights another issue: MorningCalm is a Baptist, who is very often at odds with other users of WonderCafe, many of whom are either United Church members or, while not United Church members, very liberal in their religious thinking. Although MorningCalm frequently comes into conflict with these other members, he stays on the website, where he is often accused of being narrow minded or being controversial just for the sake of it. It is clear from the discussion that he is conservative both religiously and politically, quite the opposite from some other users. Further, the tension between him and other members of the website shows that WonderCafe is not necessarily accepting of people from any worldview who may wish to discuss spirituality.

This highlights one of the tensions over the United Church belief in inclusiveness. The construction of a particular kind of inclusiveness also increasingly excludes people who do not believe in this amount of inclusivity and who do not see all people as potential recipients of salvation. Thus, MorningCalm's messages that challenge the inclusiveness on WonderCafe and United Church theology, in part, leads to his own exclusion from the

WonderCafe community.³⁶ Therefore, the United Church creates its own kind of inclusive/exclusive position.

Thus, WonderCafe can act as a place to challenge United Church activities both from within the United Church but also through comments from non-Church-affiliated website members. Regardless, WonderCafe is a far more friendly place for liberal Christians.

4.5 Religion Online or Online Religion

Can Christopher Helland's distinction between religion online and online religion help to clarify what WonderCafe is all about? There are clearly a number of tensions running through the site, including United Church leadership using it as a place to share ideas about the Church, past potential pressure from external consultants such as Smith Roberts to make the website a space for spiritual exploration instead of recruitment, and WonderCafe members' own creative use of the site as a space for socialising and support. On the one hand, WonderCafe has some very typical religion online characteristics: the majority of links on the main WonderCafe page either take users back to WonderCafe or to the United Church; the moderator of the United Church has a significant part of the website devoted to her Spirit Express project; and the presence of the United Church on WonderCafe continues to grow. To add to this, many members of WonderCafe are United Church members, and United Church clergy use the space to discuss Church issues and share or craft sermons. On the other hand, there is a significant emphasis on spiritual exploration in the poll questions and on WonderCafe projects, such as Paint Your Faith. Additionally, users are able to have

³⁶ WonderCafe, in reality, is far more exclusive. Regardless, I should note that MorningCalm also uses WonderCafe as an outlet for support and advice. He asks users about their opinions on acupuncture and advice about how to deal with his non-communicative teenage son.

discussions on topics that are not strictly relevant to the United Church policies and members can use the space to challenge the United Church, both from within the Church and from outside. Having said this, certain kinds of messages are more popular with some users than others; the website does not accept all points of view, and users will challenge other members who they feel are not being open-minded or who may be needlessly controversial.

Allowing users to take part in a website and contribute to it by forming discussions about what they are interested in rather than letting the discussion be directed by website administrators means that the website is open to—and perhaps at the mercy of—user creativity. WonderCafe has dabbled in having questions directed by an administrator. In late 2010, WonderCafe started a campaign called iWonder, which describes itself as “a new initiative from WonderCafe which uses (seemingly) simple questions to spark thought-provoking conversations” (iWonder). The program led online discussions and also invited people from outside WonderCafe to submit answers to spiritual questions outside by postcard or video. The last post from iWonder was in March 2011. The questions directed by iWonder generated some discussion among WonderCafe members but this is the only instance that I have come across of administrator-led spiritual discussions on the site. This does, however, serve as another example of the increasing United Church presence on WonderCafe.

In many ways, WonderCafe shows the complexity of a religious community adapting to an online environment. While there is a strong presence from the United Church leadership, users of the website act outside of that spiritual and religious focus. This is especially the case with the games users play on WonderCafe. The users are simply having fun and socializing, which makes WonderCafe a place to build relationships. I think that understanding WonderCafe in terms of being about religion online or online religion can be

supplemented by acknowledging Kim Knott's configuration of space, which encompasses the idea that space can be understood by its users in many different ways. This message comes across clearly in one discussion board topic called "how usfull [sic] is WonderCafe?" (ElanorGold). This question sparked many comments from users with respect to what they thought was useful about the site.

One common theme was that WonderCafe exposed users to new voices and to people from different religious backgrounds.

It has introduced me to witches, evangelicals, atheists, and a host of other including Jehovah Witness. It has made me more open to the thoughts and religion or non-religion of others. I would never have had the opportunity otherwise. (crazyheart)

Another user wrote,

I think the WCafe is very useful if just for hearing other people's point of view. This is a forum where a lot of diverse opinions meet on the same subject. Rarely in real life would you find an opportunity for discussion like this with such an eclectic group all in one room. (Neo)

These responses highlight the fact that WonderCafe has extended beyond its United-Church-related intended audience, beyond former United Church members, beyond liberal Christians and beyond Christians in general.

Many users also felt that WonderCafe offered them a way to better connect with the United Church. One user writes

The Cafe has helped to realize my desire to reconnect with and give back to the wider United Church. I have always been involved, on some level, with my local congregation but it had been about 15 years since I had done anything beyond that. A few months after joining this site, I was approached to take part in a special project at the presbytery level. Since I showed enthusiasm for that, I was then asked by my board to join presbytery. I felt comfortable asking lots of questions here during my period of discernment - and without that I am not sure that I would have felt comfortable joining presbytery if it were not for this site. I have only been able to make it to one meeting thus far, but I think this may be the connection that I was really looking for. (somegalfromcan)

In cases like this, users are able to connect with the United Church. This means that, at least for some users, WonderCafe has been successful at sparking interest in the United Church.

The users, in their responses to this question also offered answers that were outside of the Spiritual Exploration vs. United Church dichotomy. A user called Rowan, wrote that she uses WonderCafe for socializing more than anything else,

I don't know how useful the site is to me, except as a place where I mainly discuss a couple of my favorite TV shows, and I suppose I could get that elsewhere. I tend to stay off the more 'serious' threads for the most part. I do find it interesting to watch some of the other threads, I find it interesting to see what the rest of you think / say

on various topics. It's fun and entertaining so I guess that could qualify as 'useful' in a way. (Rowan)

These responses demonstrate that users make their own space for themselves on WonderCafe and that they use the site in many different ways. It is difficult to say whether that means that WonderCafe is a location for religion online or whether it is an online religion. I would argue that the framework of the website makes the website a religion online themed space, especially as the United Church of Canada continues to increase its activities and has such a strong presence there. However, when this is brought into the user side of the equation, the website is far more complicated because people use WonderCafe for many different purposes, some of which are not spiritual at all. However, it is possible that what is taking place on WonderCafe is a new type of religious community. Religious communities at any time in history have focused on elements beyond narrowly defined religious goals, and it is therefore unlikely that other religious communities would have strict religion-only interactions. The wide range of activities that may exist within a religious community also highlight the difficulty of finding religious activity online. Dawson (2005) and Cowan (2005)

both expressed doubts that religious activity was taking place online in the communities that they were studying. This leads to the question of what religious activity really is. It is true that WonderCafe does not host religious services or, for example, offer its users communion, but as a liberal Protestant church, the focus of United Church services is typically on the sermon, not the communion—or, as one might say, on the message not the ritual. WonderCafe provides space not only for users to post their sermons but also to workshop sermons and engage in intense discussion about themes that might eventually become sermons. Perhaps the internet is not a good medium for the ritualistic part of religion, but it is an excellent host for discussions about the message of religion, and for sharing religious ideas. Further, a website like WonderCafe allows users to take part in activities that extend beyond religion into what would happen naturally in an offline community. Thus, the focus on sharing personal stories, playing games and asking advice solidifies that fact that WonderCafe is, indeed, a community; its users are simply working together in a more visible medium. People within a community do not always act within the conceived purpose of the community, but in spite of that, certain values come through as community values. A shared faith among members may not be the case on WonderCafe but for the vast majority of members, there is a focus on open-mindedness and acceptance, and users who are aggressive or deemed closed-minded are chided by others. Thus, there is a clear set of community values. Interestingly, these values are also ones highlighted by the United Church as core beliefs, multi-faith relations and inclusiveness. This and the strong presence of the United Church makes me move away from suggesting that WonderCafe is a location of online religion, I think it represents a new type of space for spiritual expression, as it is not necessarily a space that will benefit the United Church in terms of attracting members or

drawing members to congregations, but it is certainly a place for spiritual discussion and explorations among its users.

4.6 Conclusion

The users of WonderCafe have formed an online community, and as with offline communities, the members take part in many different kinds of activities that do not necessarily fall within the official description of what this community is about. Users take part in spiritual discussions, discussions about the United Church, the direction it should take and experiences within its congregations. At the same time, however, they discuss politics, share their experiences raising children, consult each other about health issues, ask for advice about relationships and play games with each other. Users make WonderCafe a dynamic community. When given the ability to create their own space, users have done so, both from within the guidelines of the community and by sharing their lives and interests beyond it.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This thesis has explored the complexity of user-driven internet communication. Whatever goals a website may have, as soon as users are able to create their own space online, they may take advantage of it in unexpected ways. WonderCafe illustrates the ways in which the internet can be a powerful tool for religious communities to spark religious discussion and explorations, as well as create a feeling of community among members in different locations. However, it also illustrates that once the content is in users' hands, officials may no longer be able to control the direction the website will take. Thus, WonderCafe has become the central focus for many different activities.

At the outset of this thesis, six questions were pointed to as key areas of exploration. I now return to them. The first question asked: What were the internal factors that led to the creation of the website? What external factors contributed to its creation? These questions made up the bulk of Chapter Two. The formation of WonderCafe in 2006 was heavily influenced by several factors. At the clearest level, the United Church of Canada was suffering from the loss of members within its congregations and decided to launch a campaign to try to ignite interest in the Church among Canadians. The development of WonderCafe to fuel this interest by providing a space for spiritual exploration was in turn affected by a range of concurrent trends and traditions, including Web 2.0 technology, the marketing of religion and the United Church's own history of openness and compromise. First, the development of Web 2.0 technology meant that websites in general were becoming increasingly user-focused. Thus, WonderCafe embraced much of the Web 2.0 technology for their website; without this, it could not host the interactive space that it does. Second, the increased marketing of religion made the idea of hiring a mainstream advertising company

more acceptable, and the United Church itself says that officials were inspired by the United Church of Christ's television campaign in the United States. Third, the United Church throughout its history has been home to members from very different backgrounds and opinions. However, within the Church, while there are clashes between members about direction, especially in regards to the level of official acceptance of homosexuality, there is also an acceptance of dissent. A website that hosted and, in fact, celebrated many different expressions of religion and spirituality could therefore exist firmly within the United Church framework.

The second question was: How are tensions within the United Church over the purpose of the website evident in content and other aspects of WonderCafe? This exploration became the focus of Chapter Three. There are tensions apparent within the structure, content and use of WonderCafe. One significant strand relates to whether WonderCafe should be a space for wide-ranging spiritual exploration or a space for the United Church. This tension is present throughout the website and the interactions of the users. In my opinion, this tension reveals and is connected to the increasing United Church presence and control of WonderCafe. As the United Church's relationship with the external consultants, Smith Roberts, has ended, Church officials have become more and more present on WonderCafe, making the United Church itself far more visible. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the decision to use WonderCafe as the place to host the United Church moderator's blog and to provide space to promote the moderator's Spirit Express campaign. This was an interesting decision on the part of the Church, which in addition to WonderCafe, has a long-established web presence on its primary organizational website. Both of these features could have been placed there, and in fact, that primary site would have benefited from the increased interactivity they would have provided. Instead, perhaps removed from the original

direction for WonderCafe by time or staff changes, or perhaps inspired by the number of visitors to this new site as well as its existing ease of interactivity, Church officials decided to host these strongly denominational elements on WonderCafe. As a result, rather than providing space for spiritual exploration hosted by the United Church, WonderCafe increasingly provides space for spiritual exploration within the United Church. It will be interesting to see whether the presence of the United Church continues to expand and whether this will have an effect on the users of the website.

The third set of questions asked: When users have the power to create their own spaces online, what types of spaces do they create? How do these spaces manifest themselves on WonderCafe? WonderCafe, using Web 2.0 technology, provides space for many different types of activities. Users there have taken ownership of the space on the website and in many ways use it for their spiritual exploration. There are many discussions among members on religious topics, and the Religion and Spirituality forum is the most popular centre for activity. The high number of United Church members on WonderCafe also means that WonderCafe has become a space for clergy and lay members to discuss future directions for their religious community. Members of WonderCafe challenge United Church initiatives, show their support for United Church decisions, offer sermons and share questions about the United Church. The Church Life forum offers space for many of these explorations. At the same time, all users on WonderCafe make space for other activities that exist outside of this spiritual exploration / United Church dichotomy. WonderCafe has also become part of many members' support systems, as they share the struggles and challenges in their lives with each other and offer their prayers, support and advice for those who are facing challenges. Further, WonderCafe becomes a space for friendship and social interaction between members, where members play games with each other and talk about events in their lives. This shows that in a

dynamic, web-based environment, users are able to manipulate internet space to achieve whatever services they wish.

The fourth question posed was: How does one identify a community online? Further, how can one understand a religious community online? Within the user-created space, despite the different purposes for which members use the website, users have created a strong community. Users appear to have genuine interest and care about each other. They disagree with each other and sometimes get into arguments, but they stay together and interact together despite this. Users who fight with each other on the politics boards also offer support and praise when their sparring partners face personal challenges and joys. Beyond this, however, the more complicated question arises with respect to whether this community can be understood as a religious community. The activities within this community span far beyond activities focused on religion. This range of activity more than anything highlights the ways in which religious communities are not only religion-centric. In the offline world, members of a religious community may take part in joint activities and discussions together that extend beyond the religious institution; in United Church congregations, for example, based on information from church bulletins online, bake sales, plays, craft nights, lectures on public issues, and parenting groups are common. What sets WonderCafe apart, however, is that members of WonderCafe would probably not identify as having the same religious identity. This perhaps offers an example of how the internet environment can create space for religious communities outside of traditional offline communities. However, while users of WonderCafe may share an identity as WonderCafe users, they would absolutely not all identify WonderCafe as their religion; they are, instead, United Church members, Baptists, Pagans, Eastern Orthodox, Muslim, Agnostic and Atheists.

The fifth question was: How is online space similar to physical space, and in what aspects does it differ? For my exploration of user activity on WonderCafe and, to a lesser extent, the non-user created content of the site, I used Knott's properties of space to better understand the way that space is created. Knott's methods may have been developed in physical space but they are equally useful on virtual space. While users may not have a physical presence on WonderCafe, and while their interactions are, for the most part, text-based, it is clear that they fully inhabit the space of WonderCafe. The four properties of space gave insight into how this space on WonderCafe serves many different purposes. Virtual space is much like physical space in that people interact with each other in this space, the appearance of virtual space can be changed by the people who use it, virtual space does not exist isolated from other spaces, people move through it to other spaces easily, and virtual space is home to relations of power which may or may not be easily visible to the people within the space. Virtual space, however, differs from physical space in two very important ways. First, internet space provides an archive of activities within that space. In physical space, visitors can never look back in time to find a conversation that took place between three people two years ago. On internet discussion boards, a visitor can look through online archives to see the exact conversation that happened between users several years in the past. A visitor can also gather a complete list of all of the activities in which one member took part, including all conversations and visible interactions within the space.³⁷ Second, internet space is hyperlinked. Visitors can instantly travel from one space to another. A user on WonderCafe can click a link to a music video on YouTube, do a search about the band on a Google, and then learn more about their music and history on Wikipedia. In physical space, this type of instant travel is impossible.

³⁷ Granted, some webpages do not archive to the extent that WonderCafe does.

The sixth question asked: What are the values are presented as United Church values and how do the users of WonderCafe reinforce these values through their activities on this site? Users of WonderCafe do emphasize certain values over others. Open-mindedness is a key value all over the website, and one that mirrors the United Church core beliefs of inclusiveness and multi-faith relations. Those users who do not appear to be open-minded, especially the users who appear to be opposed to homosexuality are chided by their fellow users. When MorningCalm changes his profile picture to an image that promotes “straight pride”, he is called out in a topic devoted to debating and criticising this choice of profile picture. When the same user criticises the decision of the United Church moderator to travel by train at the cost of Via rail, other users tell him to stop being too aggressive and take his issue up with Via rail. Thus, while open-mindedness is highlighted as the key value of WonderCafe, open-mindedness is not inclusive to all potential beliefs. Generally those beliefs that are more liberal politically, socially or religiously are appreciated more by users of the website. This also highlights the complexity of including inclusiveness as a core value as it by nature also excludes those who are not as inclusive.

Has the WonderCafe website reinvigorated interest in the United Church? The analysis I conducted did not offer any evidence that those people who became active in WonderCafe who were not already United Church members made the jump to joining the United Church. I did see one example where a member became more actively involved in the church that they had already been attending. Therefore, it appears that the United Church has been very successful at attracting participants in WonderCafe, but the next step -- getting the users to the Church itself -- does not seem to have happened. This situation puts the entire campaign and Smith Roberts in an interesting position. In the earlier version of the Smith Roberts website, the United Church WonderCafe campaign was listed as one of their

successful endeavours. For Smith Roberts, however, success was not measured by bringing people through the doors of the United Church but by the buzz and media attention that WonderCafe generated. The definition of success understood by Smith Roberts serves to underline the different goals of the advertising company and the Church itself.

What, then, does this say about the idea that religion can be sold to the public if the Church simply taps into the spiritual needs of the people? The United Church did extensive research to see what Canadians thought about religion and were interested in with respect to spirituality. In many ways, the United Church seems to have followed the advice of writers such as Bibby and tried to tap into the spiritual interests of Canadians. However, when the church tried to show Canadians that the United Church offered a product they might find appealing, participants only went as far as the website and not to the doors of the church. This indicates that the ways one attracts members to church are far more complicated. It means that even if the church is offering a product many in the public would find appealing, beginning a relationship with a church requires many more factors that are far less easy to understand. It may also indicate that the way people practice their religious and spiritual beliefs may simply be increasingly removed from traditional structures. A detailed examination of this phenomenon was beyond the scope of this thesis, but falls within much of the debate around secularization, the literature on spirituality, as well as the reconfiguration of religious behaviour that appears to influence religious behaviour of Canadians.³⁸

WonderCafe is an example as a new medium for religious exploration. It takes discussions of faith onto the online environment and lets users engage in discussions with far more visibility than on offline environments. It places non-clergy members on a similar level

³⁸ See Heelas and Woodhead 2005 for a more detailed examination of this phenomenon.

as United Church clergy as all users can take part in discussions at the same level and challenge each other's comments or opinions. Users on WonderCafe have the freedom to create their own spaces for religious and non-religious discussions both within and outside of the structures given to them by the website administrators. The tangible long-term impact of the internet on religious communities remains to be seen, but WonderCafe is one experiment with new technology that has created a unique form of religious community.

5.1 Avenues for further research

This thesis has revealed a number of future areas for research. These are: a comparison between the French and English versions of WonderCafe, the impact of government regulations on internet access, the impact on privacy of internet interactions, future directions for WonderCafe, and the impact of the internet on religion in general.

WonderCafe has a French version of its website called Caf change, which was launched alongside WonderCafe, but is far less active; compared to the approximate 15,250 members on WonderCafe, there are only about 340 users on Caf change. The topics for discussion on Caf change are similar to WonderCafe, but the French site lacks the Church Life discussion board. Additionally, unlike WonderCafe, Caf change has a section called " ditorialistes Invit ," which features blogs from people outside of Caf change. One might look at the impact of these differing features, and also examine how users of Caf change feel about the United Church Moderator posting English YouTube messages to the users of Caf change. That issue in particular could lead into discussion of the francophone portion of the United Church.

A second avenue for study is the impact of government regulations on internet access, and how these affect users' ability to take part in discussions online. Such a study

would examine the potential abilities for government to censor the internet, a reality that Canadians have not experienced but which is present all over the world. A study with this focus would also take into account regulations about how internet service provider charges for access might affect users' ability to access information.

A third area for further research could be the impact that internet activities, existing on a publically accessible forum, have on individual's long-term privacy and related regulations. WonderCafe may not be the best site of research for this topic, as users here interact, for the most part, anonymously; instead, there is potential for study on websites such as Facebook, where users interact through their own identities and where their privacy is consistently being eroded. If users continue to provide much information about themselves and their activities in a public forum, will they continue to be able to demand privacy from government and advertising agencies?

Related to this, in a recent *Search Engine* podcast Jesse Brown interviews privacy expert Chris Sogohian. Through their discussion about users on the internet, Sogohian makes the important point that if "you aren't paying for the product, you are the product." The information that users provide online is not necessarily used for the purpose for which it was intended. When users reveal their interests, problems and desires online, they are also revealing this information to marketers who can use the information to better target people in their campaigns. This is likely not the intention that the users had for this information, and opens further questions related to the potential privacy and access implications.

A final, and long-term project would be to examine the ongoing development of WonderCafe to see how it changes over time and how it impacts the United Church. This exploration would also examine how people continue to use space for different types of activities on WonderCafe and how the spaces they create change over time. This exploration

would be part of the larger picture of examining whether internet technology will have long term implications on religion in general and what those implications might be.

Appendix I

Screen shot of WonderCafe.ca

The screenshot shows the WonderCafe.ca website. At the top left is the logo "wondercafe.ca" with a question mark icon. To the right is a banner for an "Emergency Appeal Horn of Africa" with a "Donate Now" button. The main content area features a large image of three women with the text "Why are we here?". Below this is a welcome message: "Welcome to the home of open-minded discussion and exploration of spiritual topics, moral issues and life's big questions, brought to you by the people of The United Church of Canada. You'll find lots to talk about in our Discussion Lounge, and you'll get your very own Profile Page for telling others a little about yourself, starting a blog, or sending and receiving WonderMails. So pull up a chair and join in." To the right of the main content is a sidebar with a search bar, "Enlarge Text" options (A A A), and two poll sections: "Just Wondering..." and "Last Week's Results". The "Just Wondering..." poll asks "Is the world healing from 9/11?" with options "Yes", "No", and "Not sure". The "Last Week's Results" poll asks "Have you experienced 'extreme weather' this summer?" with options "Yes - tornadoes, hurricanes, blistering heat, etc." and "No - nothing unusual here". At the bottom left of the main content area is a "Featured" section with two items: "EZ ANSWER SQUIRREL" with a squirrel image and "UCC-GCO A Faithful Response to 9/11" with a UCC-GCO logo. The footer contains navigation links: "Français Site Map Agreement/Privacy Guidelines of Conduct Contact Feedback Back to Top", copyright information: "© WonderCafe. All Rights Reserved Brought to you by the people of The United Church of Canada", and a disclaimer: "Opinions expressed on this site are not necessarily those of WonderCafe or The United Church of Canada".

wondercafe.ca ?

Emergency Appeal
Horn of Africa

Donate Now

Discussion
Blogs
Church Search
Groups
Merchandise

About
Member List
FAQ
Learn More
Paint Your Faith
Spirit Express

Login

Email or username:
[input field]

Password:
[input field]

Login

Join Now
Forgot your password?

f t You Tube

Why are we here?

Welcome to the home of open-minded discussion and exploration of spiritual topics, moral issues and life's big questions, brought to you by the people of The United Church of Canada. You'll find lots to talk about in our [Discussion Lounge](#), and you'll get your very own Profile Page for telling others a little about yourself, starting a blog, or sending and receiving WonderMails. So pull up a chair and join in.

Enlarge Text
A A A

Search
[input field]
Submit

Just Wondering...

Is the world healing from 9/11?:

Yes
 No
 Not sure

Vote

Last Week's Results

Have you experienced "extreme weather" this summer?:

Yes - tornadoes, hurricanes, blistering heat, etc.
 No - nothing unusual here

Vote

Featured

EZ ANSWER SQUIRREL

Mendalla
What is your soul?

UCC-GCO
A Faithful Response to 9/11

Français Site Map Agreement/Privacy Guidelines of Conduct Contact
Feedback Back to Top

© WonderCafe. All Rights Reserved
Brought to you by the people of The United Church of Canada
Opinions expressed on this site are not necessarily those of WonderCafe or
The United Church of Canada

Bibliography

- Apolito, Paolo. 2005. *The Internet and the Madonna: Religious Visionary Experiences on the Web*. Translated by Antony Shugar. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Arthur, Shawn. 2002. "Technophilia and Nature Religion: the Growth of a Paradox." *Religion*. 32(4): 303-314.
- Axel, Brian Keith. 2005. "Diaspora sublime: Sikh martyrs, internet mediation, and the question of the unimaginable." *Sikh Formations*. 1(1): 127-154.
- Barzilai-Nahon, Karine and Gad Barzilai. 2005. "Cultured Technology: The Internet and Religious Fundamentalism." *Information Society*. 21(1): 25-40.
- Beaman, Lori G. and Peter Beyer, eds. 2008. *Religion and Diversity in Canada*. Leiden: Brill.
- Beckerlegge, Gwilym. 2001. "Computer-mediated religion: Religion on the Internet at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century." In *From Sacred Text to Internet*, edited by Gwilym Beckerlegge, 219-266. Aldershot: Open University.
- Bedell, Ken. 2000. "Dispatches from the electronic frontier: explorations of mainline Protestant use of the internet." In *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promise*, edited by Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan, 183-203. New York: JAI-Elsivier Science Inc.
- Berg, Bruce L. 2009. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. 7th ed. Toronto: Allyn & Bacon.
- Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969.
- Berger, Peter, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas. 2008. *Religious America, secular Europe?: a theme and variations*. Farnham: Ashgate.

- Beyer, Peter. 2005. "Religious Vitality in Canada: The Complementarity of Religious Market and Secularization Perspectives." In *Religion and Canadian Society: Traditions, Transitions and Innovations*, edited by Lori G. Beaman, 71-92. Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press.
- Bibby, Reginald W. 2000. "Canada's Mythical Mosaic: Some census findings." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 39(2): 235-239.
- . 2004a. *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*. Toronto: Novalis.
- . 2004b. *Restless Churches: How Canada's Churches can contribute to the Emerging Religious Renaissance*. Toronto: Novalis.
- Bramadat, Paul and David Seljak, eds. 2008. *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.
- , eds. 2009. *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.
- Brasher, Brenda. 2004. *Give me that Online Religion*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers San Francisco.
- Bruce, Steve. *God is Dead: Secularisation in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.
- Bunt, Gary. 2000. "Surfing Islam: Ayatolas, Shayks and Hajjis on the Superhighway." In *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promise*, edited by Jeffrey K Hadden and Douglas Cowan, 125-151. New York: JAI-Elsivier Science Inc.
- . 2005. "Negotiating Islam and Muslims in cyberspace." In *Cyberspace-cyberethics-cybertheology*, edited by Erik Borgman, Stephan Erp and Hille Haker, 68-77. London: SMC.
- . 2006. "CyberMuslimsUK: Islam, UK Muslims Communities and Cyberspace." In *Religious Communities on the Internet: Proceedings from a Conference*, edited by Göran Larsson, 11-29. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press.

- Calhoun, Peter J. 2006. "Gruchy, Lydia (1894-1992)." *The Encyclopaedia of Saskatchewan*.
http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/gruchy_lydia_e_1894-1992.html
- Campbell, Heidi. 2005. *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are one in the network*.
 New York: Peter Lang.
- . 2010. *When Religion Meets New Media*. New York: Routledge.
- Casanova, Jose. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago
 Press, 1994.
- Castells, Manuel. 1996. *The Rise of Network Society*. Vol 1 of *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- . 2001. *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*.
 Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- CBC. 2011. "Facebook: Women Rule, Facebook users more socially, politically engaged,
 U.S. study finds." *CBC News*. June 17.
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2011/06/17/technology-facebook-women.html>
- Chaves, Mark and Philip S. Gorski. 2001. "Religious Pluralism and Religious Participation."
Annual Review of Sociology 27(261-281).
- Cheong, Pauline Hope, Jessie P H Poon, Shirlena Huang and Irene Casas. 2009. "The
 Internet Highway and Religious Communities: Mapping and Contested Space in
 Religion-Online." *The Information Society* 25(5): 291-302.
- Choquette, Robert. 2004. *Canada's Religion: an historical introduction*. Ottawa: University
 of Ottawa.
- Community of Concern. 2011. "Purpose and Objectives." *Community of Concern within the
 United Church*. http://www.communityofconcern.org/?page_id=24

- Corrocher, Nicoletta. 2011. "The adoption of web 2.0 services: An Empirical investigation." *Technological Forecasting & Social Change* 78:547-558.
- Cowan, Douglas E. 2000. "Religion, Rhetoric, and Scholarship: Managing Vested Interest in E-Space." In *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promise*, edited by Jeffrey K Hadden and Douglas Cowan, 101-124. New York: JAI-Elsivier Science Inc.
- . 2005. *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Dawson, Lorne L. 2004. "Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community." In *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, edited by Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, 69-84. New York: Routledge.
- . 2005. "The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace." In *Religion and Cyberspace*, edited by Morton T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, 15-37. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Davie, Grace. 1994. *Religion in Britain since 1945: believing without belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- DeVries, Larry, Don Baker and Dan Overmeyer, eds. 2010. *Asian Religions in British Columbia*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Einstein, Mara. 2008. *Brands of Faith: Marketing religion in a commercial age*. London: Routledge.
- Emerging Spirit. 2007. "About Emerging Spirit." *United Church of Canada*. http://www.emergingspirit.ca/about_emerging_spirit
- . 2007b. "Why Emerging Spirit?." *United Church of Canada*. http://www.emergingspirit.ca/why_emerging_spirit

- . 2007c. “The Wodnercafe Campaign.” *United Church of Canada*.
http://www.emergingspirit.ca/the_wondercafe_campaign
- . 2008. “Miracle.” *United Church of Canada*.
http://www.emergingspirit.ca/miracle_0
- . 2009. “Door Scratches.” *United Church of Canada*.
http://www.emergingspirit.ca/door_scratches
- . 2009b. “‘We’re just glad you could make it’ congregational ads.” *United Church of Canada*.
http://www.emergingspirit.ca/image_galleries/wondercafe_ads/were_just_glad_you_could_make_it_congregational_ads
- . “Sinful.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.emergingspirit.ca/sinful>
- . “Guilt.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.emergingspirit.ca/guilt>
- Gee, John Paul. 2005. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. London: Routledge.
- Grant, John Webster. 1967. *The Canadian Experience of Church Union*. Richmond: John Knox Press.
- . 2011. “Wilson, Lois Miriam.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.
http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ART_A0008626
- Hadden, Jeffrey K. and Douglas E. Cowan. 2000. “‘The promised land or electronic chaos?’ Towards understanding religion on the internet.” In *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promise*, edited by Jeffrey K Hadden and Douglas Cowan, 3-21. New York: JAI-Elsivier Science inc.

- Halledèn, Philip. 2006. "Militant Salafism on the Internet? Alnega.com and the legacy of Yusuf al-'Ayyiri." In *Religious Communities on the Internet: Proceedings from a Conference*, edited by Göran Larsson, 62-85. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press.
- Hanomansing, Ian. 1988. "United Church allows gay ministers." *CBC Digital Archives*. http://archives.cbc.ca/society/religion_spirituality/clips/1398/
- Harding, John S., Victor Sōgen Hori and Alexander Soucy, eds. *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada*. Montreal/Kingston: McGill/Queen's University Press.
- Helland, Christopher. 2000. "Online-Religion/Religion-Online and virtual communitas." In *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promise*, edited by Jeffrey K Hadden and Douglas Cowan, 205-223. New York: JAI-Elsivier Science Inc.
- . 2007. "Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier: Developing Virtual Connections with Sacred Homelands." *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 12(3): 956-976.
- . In Press. "Online Religion in Canada: From Hype to Hyperlink." In *Religion and Canadian Society*, edited by Lori G. Beaman. 2nd Ed. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Hoover, Stewart M. and Jinku Park. 2004. "Religious meaning in the Digital Age: Field Research on internet/web religion." In *Belief in Media: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity*, edited by Peter Horsfield, Mary E Hess and Adan M Medrano, 120-136. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Hseih, Hsui-Fang and Sarah E. Shannon. 2005. "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis." *Qualitative Health Research* 15(9): 1277-1288.

- Introvigne, Massimo. 2000. "“So many Evil things’: anti-cult terrorism via the internet.” In *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promise*, edited by Jeffrey K Hadden and Douglas W. Cowan, 277-306. New York: JAI-Elsivier Science Inc.
- iTunes. 2010. “E-Z Answer Squirrel.” *iTunes Preview*. <http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/e-z-answer-squirrel/id396473403?mt=8>
- Johnson, Bobbie. 2009. “Older Users becoming dominant on facebook.” *The Guardian*. July 7. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/blog/2009/jul/07/facebook-socialnetworking>
- Karaflogka, Anastasia. 2006. *E-Religion: A Critical Appraisal of Religious Discourse on the World Wide Web*. London: Equinox.
- Kawabata, Akira and Takanori Tamura. 2007. “Online religion in Japan: Websites and religious counselling from a comparative cross-cultural perspective.” *Journal of Computer Mediated communication*. 12(3): 999-1019.
- Kee, Kevin. 2006. *Revivalists: Marketing the Gospel in English Canada, 1884- 1957*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens.
- Kitiarsa, Pattana, ed. 2008. *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*. London: Routledge.
- Knott, Kim. 2005. *The Location of the Sacred: A Spatial Analysis*. London: Equinox.
- . 2008. “From locality and back again: A spatial journey in the study of religion.” *Religion*, 39(2): 154-160.
- Kraut, Robert, *et al.* 1998. “Internet Paradox: a social technology that reduces social interaction.” *American Psychologist* 53:1011-1031.

- Larsson, Göran. 2006. "Sidratul-Muntaha: an Alternative Voice for Swedish Muslim Cyberspace?" In *Religious Communities on the Internet: Proceedings from a Conference*, edited by Göran Larsson, 86-105. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press.
- Lawrence, Bruce B. 2002. "Allah On-Line: The Practice of Global Islam in the Information Age." In *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Exploring in Media, Religion and Culture*, edited by Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, 237-254. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lim, SeongBae and Daniel Palacios-Marques. 2011. "Culture and purpose of Web 2.0 service adoption: a study in the USA, Korea and Spain." *The Service Industry Journal*. 31(1): 123-131.
- Lochhead, David M. 1986. "UCHUG: The Electronic Network of the United Church of Canada." *Netweaver*. <http://cgi.gjhost.com/~cgi/mt/netweaverarchive/000148.html>
- Luckmann, Thomas. *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. London: MacMillan, 1967.
- Maraini, Ermate. 2006. "The role of states and markets in the production of Islamic knowledge on-line the example of Yusuf al-Quardawi and Amru Khaled." In *Religious Communities on the Internet: Proceedings from a Conference*, edited by Göran Larsson, 131-147. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press.
- Meyer, Jean-Francios. 2000. "Religious movements and the internet: the new frontier of cult controversies." *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promise*, eds. Jeffrey K Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan, 249-276. New York: JAI-Elsivier Science Inc.
- McGuire, Meredith B. 2008. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Nedelsky, Jennifer and Roger Hutchinson. 2008. "Clashes of Principle and the Possibility of Dialogue: A Case Study of the United Church of Canada." *Law and Religious Pluralism in Canada*, edited by Richard Moon, 41-64. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Ng, Greer Anne Wenh-In. 2009. "The United Church of Canada: A Church Fittingly National." In *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, eds. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak, 204-246. Toronto: Toronto University Press
- O'Leary, Stephen D. 2004. "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks." In *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, edited by Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, 34-54. New York: Routledge.
- O'Toole, Roger, Douglas F. Campbell, John A. Hannigan, Peter Beyer and John H. Simpson. 2006. "Religion in Canada: its developments and contemporary situation." In *Religion and Canadian Society: Traditions, Transition, and Innovations*, edited by Lori G. Beaman, 7-21. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- O'Toole, Roger *et al.* 1993. "The United Church in Crisis." In *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Focus*, edited by W. E. Hewitt, 275-287. Toronto: Butterworths.
- Outreach Magazine. 2008. "The Outreach 100: Largest and Fastest Growing Churches in America." *Sermon Central*. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/articleb.asp?article=Top-100-Largest-Churches>
- Retson, Don. 2006. "United Church reaches in media campaign: Cheeky ads, website aim at 30- to 45-year-olds." *Edmonton Journal*. November 11.
- Saddleback. 2011. "History." *Saddleback Church*. <http://www.saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/history/>
- Schmidt, Garbi. 2006. "The formation of transnational identities among young Muslims in Denmark". In *Religious Communities on the Internet: Proceedings from a*

- Conference*, edited by Göran Larsson, 153-163. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press. 150-163.
- Silcox, Claris Edwin. 1933. *Church Union in Canada: Its Causes and Consequences*. New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research.
- Smith, Robert. 2009. "Number of US facebook users over 35 nearly doubles in the last 60 days." *Inside Facebook*. March 25. <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2009/03/25/number-of-us-facebook-users-over-35-nearly-doubles-in-last-60-days/>
- Smith, Robert. 1986. "Apology to First Nations Peoples." *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/policies/1986/a651>
- Smith Roberts. "Newspaper." *Smith Roberts*. http://www.smithrobertsandco.com/ucc_campaign_PR_news.htm
- . "Campaign Launch." *Smith Roberts*. http://www.smithrobertsandco.com/ucc_campaign_PR.htm
- Stark, Rodney and Roger Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Statistics Canada. 2003. *2001 Census: Analysis Series- Religions in Canada*. Statistics Canada. Ottawa. <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/analytic/companion/rel/pdf/96F0030XIE2001015.pdf>
- Sutter, John D. and Doug Gross. 2010. "Apple unveils the 'magical' iPad." *CNN Tech*. January 27. http://articles.cnn.com/2010-01-27/tech/apple.tablet_1_ipad-ibook-tablet?_s=PM:TECH

- Thiessen, Joel and Lorne Dawson. 2008. "Is there a Renaissance of Religion in Canada? A Critical Look at Bibby and Beyond." *Studies in Religion* 37(3-4): 389-415.
- Thomas, Christopher and Amit Sheth. 2011. "Web Wisdom: An essay on how Web 2.0 and Sematic Web can foster a global knowledge society." *Computers in Human Behavior*. 27: 1285-1293.
- Tindal, Mardi. 2011. "Non-violent civil disobedience." *WonderCafe.ca*. August 6. <http://www.wondercafe.ca/blogs/moderator-mardi-tindal/non-violent-civil-disobedience>
- Trothen, Tracy J. 2000. "A social ethical analysis of the United Church of Canada's historical approach to human sexuality." *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 29(3):325-339.
- Tsotsis, Alexia. 2011. "Comscore says you don't got mail: web email usage declines, 59% among teens!" *TechCrunch*. February 7. <http://techcrunch.com/2011/02/07/comscore-says-you-dont-got-mail-web-email-usage-declines-59-among-teens/>
- Twitchell, James B. 2004. *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College, Inc., and Museumworld*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- UCCEmergingSpirit. 2009. "[Extended Content] Paint Your Faith." *Youtube*. <http://www.youtube.com/user/UCCEmergingSpirit#p/u/11/weZDpw5Jn3s>
- UCCEmergingSpirit. 2010. "Paint your faith." *Youtube*. <http://www.youtube.com/user/UCCEmergingSpirit#p/u/14/KTgSvzFEX-8>
- United Church of Canada. 2003. "The United Church of Canada General Council Offices Website Annual Report." *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.united-church.ca/files/local/it/web/2003annualreport.pdf>

- . 2009. “General Council Budget 2009.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://www.united-church.ca/files/funding/budget2009.pdf>
- . 2009b. “Organization: Statistics.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.united-church.ca/organization/statistics>
- . 2009c. “Record of Proceedings of the 40th General Council 2009.” *United Church of Canada*. http://gc40.united-church.ca/files/ROP2009_complete.pdf
- . 2010a. “Website Planning: Strategies and Guidelines.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://www.united-church.ca/local/it/web/planning>
- . 2010b. “Overview: a Brief History.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.united-church.ca/history/overview/brief/>
- . 2010c. “History: United Church Crest.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://www.united-church.ca/history/crest>
- . 2010d. “Governance: Congregations and Court of the United Church.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.united-church.ca/organization/governance/structure>
- . 2010e. “Beliefs: Overview of Beliefs.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/overview#9>
- . 2010f. “The Healing Fund: About the healing fund.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://www.united-church.ca/funding/healing/about>
- . 2010g. “Organisation: Moderator.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.united-church.ca/organization/moderator>
- . 2010h. “Social Justice.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.united-church.ca/justice>
- . 2011a. “Overview: Historical Timeline.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://www.united-church.ca/history/overview/timeline>

- . 2011b. “Action and Campaigns: Emerging Spirit.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://www.united-church.ca/getinvolved/emergingspirit>
- . 2011c. “Find a Church or Minister.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://locator.united-church.ca/>
- Van Die, Marguerite, ed. 2001. *Religion and Public Life in Canada: Historical and
 Compartice Perspectives*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- van Dijk, Tuen A. 1993. “Principles of critical discourse analysis.” *Discourse and Society*.
 4(2): 249-283.
- Waldie, Paul. 2006. “Campaign aims to fill Pews.” *The Globe and Mail*. 7 November.
- Wilson, Bryan R. *Religion in Secular Society*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
- Wondercafe. “About.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.wondercafe.ca/about>
- . “Canada.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.wondercafe.ca/groups/canada>
- . “Church Search.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.wondercafe.ca/churches>
- . “FAQ.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.wondercafe.ca/faq>
- . “Guestbook.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://www.wondercafe.ca/spiritexpress/guestbook>
- . “Guidelines of Conduct.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://www.wondercafe.ca/guidelines>
- . “Learn More.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.wondercafe.ca/learn-more>
- . “MacKay United Church.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://www.wondercafe.ca/churches/mackay-united-church>
- . “Main Page.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.wondercafe.ca/index.php>
- . “Saving Souls.” *United Church of Canada*.
<http://www.wondercafe.ca/groups/saving-souls>

- . “Spirit Express.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.wondercafe.ca/spiritexpress>
- . 2009. “Ad Campaign.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.wondercafe.ca/ad-campaign/print-ads>
- . 2006. “EZ Answer Squirrel.” *United Church of Canada*. <http://www.wondercafe.ca/webisodes/ez-answer-squirrel>
- Young, Pamela Dickey. 2006. “Same-sex marriage and the Christian Churches in Canada.” *Studies in Religion* 35(3): 3-23.
- . 2008. “Two by Two: Religion, Sexuality and Diversity in Canada.” In *Religion and Diversity in Canada*, edited by Lori G. Beaman and Peter Beyer, 85-104. Leiden: Brill.
- . 2010. “Taking Account of Religion in Canada: The Debates over Gay and Lesbian Marriage.” *Studies in Religion* 39(3):333-361.