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### The Influence of Market-Driven Philosophy on Church Marketing Messages

The Pledge of Allegiance may say “one nation, under God,” but are most Americans actually going to church on the weekends? According to Gallup, who has been tracking church membership since 1937, 56% of Americans claimed membership to a religious institution in 2016 compared to 76% back in 1947 and regular weekly attendance at churches is currently down to about 36%. To the Christian church, these numbers are troubling and have motivated them to look for new ways to appeal to people who do not attend church regularly and entice people to become members.

One of the ways churches have attempted to persuade non-church goers to attend services is by taking a hint from modern marketing and communication techniques. In the last 20 years or so, a type of church called “market-driven churches” have proven their ability to draw in huge numbers at weekly religious services by utilizing these secular and data-proven tactics.

Dr. Gary E. Gilley, a Cambridge-educated pastor, has been a vocal critic of prolific and influential market-driven churches like Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Valley Community Church for years. In his 2005 book titled, *This Little Church Went to Market*, Gilley provides an extensive argument for why these churches are

influencing the rise of secularism in the Christian church. In a 2013 interview, Gilley says Willow Creek and Saddleback “changed the face of Christianity, not only in America, but throughout the world and they have revolutionized what the church looks like and how it functions” (McMahon). Willow Creek accomplished this level of influence by creating the Willow Creek Association (WCA) to recruit churches to their way of conveying the message of the gospel. Although more detail about the WCA is presented later in this text, it is important now to note their reach across the country through their 1,000+ member churches and around the globe. According to Gilley, the messages sent out by WCA are not only a threat to American Evangelical churches, but to churches of all Christian denominations everywhere.

By definition, a market-driven church is a church whose actions are “intentionally designed to effect numerical growth” (Gilley 17). Gilley criticizes these churches for building up their membership through the use of polls, surveys, and the latest trends in marketing instead of being inspired by the early church in the New Testament (44). In addition to the term “market-driven,” similar terms such as “new paradigm,” “seeker sensitive,” and “purpose driven” are used to describe this type of church (17). However, Gilley makes a point to distinguish between megachurches and market-driven churches: just because a church is large does not necessarily mean they adhere to this philosophy (19).

Gilley also identifies why the market-driven philosophy is so effective in bringing people to church. He says these churches use the same strategies that a company would use to sell a product, like meeting consumer interests by convincing them the product can do everything they need it do. This would be called the felt need approach which, put another

way, says the customer is always right and their need is sovereign (Gilley 42). By wrapping up the gospel in a pretty wrapper, Gilley says churches are convincing non-believers that God exists purely to make their lives easier and perverting what the church is supposed to be according to doctrine (McMahon). For example, in the days of the early church, “the services were not geared for the unbelievers but for the saints” (Gilley 10) meaning that the church’s main goal was to please the deity and not necessarily to bring in new members. Discernment is necessary for churches to draw the line between using helpful marketing techniques to accomplish their mission of evangelism and undermining the original goals of the Christian church.

The justification for a study of this nature comes from Dr. Gilley himself. While Gilley presented a thoroughly logical argument in his book and interview, he never provides any empirical data to support his claim that churches are actually using these methods. He uses the opinions of other religious scholars like himself, high-ranking church leaders from across the country, or even just authors of religion-focused web articles and books. These sources are not academically reliable and possibly biased and for the most part, their opinions did not originate in peer-reviewed sources. Also, as a believer in the Christian faith, he uses passages of Scripture as evidence to prove that the market-driven philosophy is inherently wrong. By instead looking objectively at the messages sent by churches to consumers, through this study, we may be able to find support for Gilley’s claims that market-driven churches have affected the overall message Christianity is sending to non-believers about the gospel.

In addition to Gilley’s beliefs waiting to be verified empirically, few studies about church marketing have been conducted at all. Of the studies that have been conducted,

none seem to analyze “market-drive churches” specifically and by popularizing the use of this term, Gilley has emerged as one of the most prominent critics of this segment of American Christianity. Any information this study can provide about the nature of modern church marketing would be helpful in expanding the knowledge of the field, but especially if insight can be provided on the influence of groups like the WCA. Finally, although Gilley came out more recently in 2013 to confirm he still believed what he wrote about churches following the trend of a market-driven philosophy in 2005, this analysis will help to provide up-to-date information about the presence of such a trend.

While the study of church marketing could fall within the boundaries of business, religion, and even psychology, this study will look at the issue through the lens of communication. Because communication is focused on messages and studies message-related behavior, it is appropriate to analyze a leading influence in the religious sector on the ways churches are encouraged to expand their membership. In a way, churches operate the same as any other business or organization and are therefore vulnerable to making the same communication mistakes. However, because of their connection to things “beyond this world,” churches exist in an even higher-stakes part of the field of communication (McDaniel 25). Because the vast majority of research into successful marketing methods has been done with secular groups in mind, this study could be beneficial to both the religious community and the academic world of communication by quantifying and analyzing the influence of the Willow Creek Association on church marketing overall.

I chose to research the marketing tactics of churches because of my own experience with religion while growing up. I have attended many Christian churches over the years, sometimes being a member of more than one at a time. With this variety of experiences, I

began to notice the ways many churches market themselves: their branding, the types of people they seem to be trying to attract, and how they make themselves appealing enough for people to return. My family has attended a WCA church for ten years now and we have been active members in various ways. However, it is my brother's role as a leader within the technical team that has always intrigued me the most. The level to which his team and the worship team calculates every move to cater to the worshipper's experience made me wonder if this was the right approach or even an effective one.

In his 2013 interview, Gilley said readers of his book have contacted him and said, "they recognize what was going on in their church, and they knew something was wrong, they knew something was out of sync with what they understood Scripture to say, but they couldn't understand or put their finger on it" (McMahon). Both this statement and the entire *Little Church* book struck a personal note for me and inspired me to investigate whether Willow Creek Churches and their market-driven nature are as influential as Gilley claims.

To clarify, this study is not about gathering evidence to prove the actions of market-driven churches contradict Scripture or about doing something that has already been done like measuring the effectiveness of these marketing tactics. It is also not about passing judgment on whether what they are doing is wrong. The goal of this study is to simply investigate the criticisms of Dr. Gilley by objectively analyzing the presence of certain characteristics of church marketing materials.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Background on Church Marketing***

Over the years, there has been relatively little academic research done about the relationship between the church and marketing. What has been done only focuses on *how* churches should market or *why* they should not do it at all (Wrenn 45). Churches are unique in that many have been hesitant on whether or not marketing was something they believed they should be doing. According to Wrenn, some theologians do not believe churches should participate in marketing themselves because of a lack of a reciprocal exchange, which the exchange theory of communication states is necessary for marketing to be effective (48).

The current status of church marketing involves a few different issues, some which have been unresolved for decades. For instance, one study found that some churches are much more hesitant to engage in such a “scheme” as marketing because they hold beliefs that marketing is evil, degrading to God, and not Biblical (Bolu 84). Other criticisms of church marketing are that money should be spent elsewhere and that marketing is for businesses, not churches (Bolu 84). On the other hand, Christianity as a whole has been successful at marketing the faith through related ventures like specialty bookstores that now sell billions of dollars of merchandise every year, and through Christian broadcasts and movies (Brown 113).

### ***Recommended Marketing Tactics for Churches***

Every year, the Willow Creek Association uses their Global Leadership Summit to educate thousands of people on how to maximize their impact on the world. The pastor of Saddleback Community Church, Rick Warren, wrote a book called *The Purpose Driven Life* that taught readers how to build a church around the needs of people and subsequently

sold over 30 million copies (Elite Writings). Based on these facts alone, the influence of these two churches is undeniable. However, beyond the recommendations of these groups and individuals, other resources exist that have influenced how today's churches market.

Although not many academic and objective resources exist for churches to use in creating a tailored marketing plan, there have been some studies that can offer helpful guidance. Webb's study in 2012, after surveying about 259 churches about effective marketing techniques, came to the conclusion that certain actions worked better in achieving certain results (74). These possible results were split into three categories: retain members, attract visitors, and persuade attendees to become members. In order to retain members, Webb found that things like social media, having a church website to access resources, and having children's ministries worked best. To attract visitors, personal referrals from others, receiving a monthly newsletter, and the physical environment were a few things churches could work on. Then finally, to persuade attendees to become members, churches could have a multisite church, have women in leadership, and create publications from the pastor (80). Some of these recommendations were suggestions of what to highlight within marketing materials or simply what marketing materials to make at all.

In order to use the most effective messages for their unique audience, it is essential that churches identify and get to know the people they hope to reach. McDaniel stressed the importance of taking the consumer's viewpoint into consideration and believes churches have a greater responsibility to do so than businesses (25). Identifying an audience can be difficult for churches because they attempt to reach such a "heterogeneous" or diverse market that all have different backgrounds and needs

(McDaniel 24). It can also be difficult because of the need to market to two very different audiences: 1) potential members whose focus is on why they should attend the church and what it can offer them and 2) current members who need consistent reasons to stay, given by communicating to them the events and services the church offers that can meet their spiritual needs. Because of the specialized knowledge needed to “best” reach unbelievers, it is easy to understand how churches attempting to boost their attendance look to influences like Willow Creek who can offer them a simple path to success.

### ***Religious Responsibility***

While corporations, small businesses, and even non-profit companies all have a duty to determine what standards of ethics they will hold themselves to in their marketing tactics, the religious sector is a sector held to an even higher ethical standard (McDaniel 25). These “businesses,” if you will, are bound to a code of ethics with their marketing that is less flexible and more powerful than that of any other business.

Despite this, churches have seemed to become “whatever they have to be” in order to survive (Pritchard et al. 29). Some studies have noted that to remain neutral and avoid controversy, churches often water down their messages, sometimes until they can barely be characterized as religious at all or simply avoid advertising their more controversial beliefs in fear of turning people away. Christian Pritchard et al. regard this use of generic messages as a “loss of truth” (29) and Wrenn, “Marketing may bring success in numbers but hurts the campaigns for truth and wisdom” that should be the mission for every church (45).

## ***The Influence of Willow Creek***

The conclusions in Gilley's book were numerous, despite all his evidence being speculative. Some of the best evidence Gilley provided of the influence of market-driven churches like Willow Creek came from statistics reported by the church itself. The first comes from the Willow Creek Association (WCA), a group that churches can pay to be a part of if they wish to have access to exclusive material that can help grow their church. Member churches are essentially buying into this market-driven philosophy or at least interested in growing their church numbers through new techniques. To this, Gilley argues, "the Sunday morning worship attendance is not the criteria God uses to judge the true effectiveness of a local church" which is contrary to the motivations of WCA membership (Gilley 20).

Another large influence Willow Creek has is through their annual Global Leadership Summit that is broadcast to over 600 locations across 128 countries in 60 languages. However, Gilley is skeptical about the religious foundations and motivations of this far-reaching Leadership Summit. "Read the leading literature from the pens of the church growth experts and you will find a plethora of marketing techniques and only passing references to the book of Acts (the divinely inspired church growth manual) or any other Scripture" (Gilley 17).

Although it has been over 10 years since the updated version of his book was published, Gilley stands by his original conclusions and continues to name the rise of secularism as a threat through an interview he did in 2013:

Flushed with success, [the church] is rushing headlong down the slope of secularism. It will only be a matter of time before it is realized that this

modern church having lost its message, having compromised the faith, having mistaken numerical success for the blessing of God, will implode, for there will be nothing left to sustain it (Gilley 117).

Despite all this, Gilley stresses that no one is saying churches should not advertise events, be kind to visitors, or strive for excellence overall. He also says that good churches do still exist but they are more difficult to find nowadays. Gilley's ultimate conclusion is that there could be a silver lining to the secularism of the church. One day, it could lead to the raising of a stronger church, one that is more serious about truth, willing to be despised by the world, and not ashamed of "the true gospel" (Gilley 117).

After analyzing existing research, it is easy to justify the need to conduct a study like this. In many cases, the focus has been slightly different, leaving very little reliable knowledge about the relationship between churches and marketing. In other cases, the information is outdated or just simply not based off empirical sources. Finally, Gilley's findings require supporting evidence in order to prove their validity. With that in mind, my research question is straightforward about what it is trying to accomplish.

**RQ: Does the content of marketing materials for member churches of the Willow Creek Association support Gilley's criticisms of market-driven churches?**

## **Method**

In order to objectively compare the marketing materials of various churches and sufficiently answer the research question, this study uses content analysis. Examples of marketing materials from WCA member churches were reviewed by coders who looked for

certain themes that were then converted into quantifiable data. Upon reaching the required coder agreement threshold, sufficient data was found to support or refute the claims of Dr. Gilley in *This Little Church Went to Market* and his more recent interview.

The first step was to choose the text or message to be analyzed. The unit of analysis needed to remain consistent in order to draw comparisons and interpret meaning from them (Keyton 235). While social media posts, physical handouts, entire websites, and published belief statements could all be considered marketing materials, this content analysis examined clips from promotional videos created by WCA churches. This medium helped to show a sample of the personality of the church while also clearly and succinctly communicating the church's values to coders. The criteria for the videos chosen was that their intended audience must be nonmembers and the video must be a summary video of the aspects and values of the church as opposed to sermon footage, sermon series promotional videos, and/or informational videos for members.

To gather the video clips, the list of member churches that the WCA provides on their website was used. Churches in Missouri and Kansas were chosen first to analyze because of their proximity to the research and then churches in the state of Illinois were also used given the state's close location and its claim as the home state of the WCA. The lists were used alphabetically by taking the name of each church and pulling up its website to look for a promotional video. Because videos needed to be geared towards nonmembers, they needed to be easily accessible and, if they existed, were usually found on the home page or in the section specifically for seekers.

The websites of over 100 different WCA churches were reviewed. One quarter had videos that fit the selection criteria. Forty initial clips were collected, with each church contributing anywhere from 1-5 clips. Of this set, 34 were randomly chosen for coding. The coding sheet included two levels of coding categories. Gilley's analysis of church marketing served as the basis for the five categories covering five major types of messages that churches use in their promotional videos. Within each major category, there were two subcategories. These two categories represented what Gilley identified as "positive" and "negative" marketing actions committed by churches. Coders were asked to choose one category, indicating positive or negative, for each unit. Coders were trained on each category and given a guide to use as reference while watching each video and making their decisions. The definitions for the 10 categories are as follows:

**[Worship] Scripture-Based:** This type of worship is focused on the greatness of God, thankfulness to God, and based on an accurate interpretation of scripture. The worship is meant to partner with the teaching of the Word of God to increase the believer's knowledge of God and ultimately, to please God.

**[Worship]: Entertainment:** This type of worship focuses on meeting the needs – like gratification, pleasure, and inward release - of those worshipping. Churches that use this style of worship use specific means to ensure their members are not bored and are instead thrilled and excited.

**[Kids]: Thorough Study of the Bible:** In churches that use this type of "Sunday school" setting, the focus is on Biblical instruction that increases in complexity as children get older. The end goal is that children leave with enough knowledge of the Bible to make scripturally-based decisions in adulthood and are able to accurately teach others about the values found in scripture.

**[Kids]: Other:** Churches that use commercial curriculum or similar systems of "Sunday school" place emphasis on engaging children in fun activities and learning key Bible stories and simplistic lessons from those stories through the use of prepared manuals and guides. These churches are focused on providing childcare while adults attend services.

**[Service/Missions]: For God's Glory:** These churches promote their works of service by citing Biblical passages that require it and through the glory that acts of service will bring to God.

**[Service/Missions]: For Personal Gain:** This type of church promotes service and missions to their members by describing the benefits that service will bring those that serve. They also use much of their members' service efforts towards attracting new members to the church.

**[Church Attitude]: Doing What God Says:** This church is focused on doing the things God wants from them and meeting the standards set in the Bible. They challenge their members and work for positive change in themselves and in the community. They encourage seekers to be open-minded, learn new things through careful study, and to leave different from how they came.

**[Church Attitude]: Meeting Personal Needs:** This church revolves around the needs of the people they are trying to attract and keep as members. They want to be there to help in any situation a member may need from childcare, to the type of worship they like, to providing food and a casual atmosphere. Their goal is to make people comfortable enough to want to come back.

**[Church Goals]: Knowing God:** When people seek or churches provide ways to get to know more about God, Jesus, and the teachings of scripture.

**[Church Goals]: Feeling God:** When people seek or churches provide ways for people to feel the presence of God.

Each coder took about 20-40 minutes to look through the units. Once the coding process was completed, the coder was dismissed and the coding sheets were used to determine if the level of agreement was reached between the two coders at least 70% of the time (Davis and Lachlan 230).

## ***Results***

The results of my initial coding session were inconclusive due to the fact that the coders only reached 68% agreement, just short of the required threshold. To remedy this, another round of coding was conducted using two new coders and a revised coding sheet.

This revised coding sheet included the renaming of some categories, more logical organization, the removal of two units that had confused the previous coders, and the redefining of the Church Goals category so that coders would understand it to be more of an “other” category that they should only select if they could not find an appropriate unit in any other category. Also given the complexity of the multiple categories, agreement was now to be determined in a two-tiered process. Agreement focused on whether the coders placed the units in the same category. If the coders met the threshold agreement level for category, then a second tier of analysis occurred within those categories on whether they agreed on the positive or negative subcategory. In the second round of coding, the 70% agreement requirement was met and exceeded in both tiers.

For the first tier of analysis, the coders marked the same major category 72% of the time (23/34 units). Units they disagreed upon were omitted, with the second tier of analysis examining those previous agreed upon units and the level of agreement in the subcategories. For the second tier, coders chose the same subcategory 78% of the time (18/23 units). Out of the 18 agreed units, 15 (83%) were in categories Gilley would deem as “negative” qualities in a church and 3 (17%) were in categories that Gilley would deem as “positive” aspects of a church. The table below goes into more detail about which characteristics were found to be present in the promotional videos and which ones were not.

Category	Subcategory	Number of Times Coders Agreed on the Category's Presence
Worship	Scripture-Based (+)	1
	Entertainment (-)	4

Kids	Thorough Study of the Bible (+)	1
	Other (-)	2
Service	For God's Glory (+)	0
	For Personal Gain (-)	3
Church Attitude	Doing What God Says (+)	1
	Meeting Personal Needs (-)	6
Church Goals	Knowing God (+)	0
	Feeling God (-)	0
	Total	18

### ***Discussion***

With regards to the research question, the data collected overwhelmingly supports the answer that yes, the content of marketing materials for member churches of the Willow Creek Association matches Gilley's criticisms of market-driven churches. For example, the most prevalent practice was "meeting personal needs" followed by "entertainment." The results offer support for Gilley's observations, lending credence to his view that WCA churches are using different approaches than other, more traditional churches. Although this finding was not completely surprising based on the length to which Gilley discussed these categories in his book, this study now provides empirical data that supports this observation.

If what was learned from this study were ever to be practically applied, it would be most helpful to marketing teams within churches, especially within WCA churches. Those teams would first need to decide whether their church agrees with Gilley's criticisms and would like to avoid certain practices in their marketing efforts or if they disagree with Gilley and see value in doing things like meeting the personal needs of their members and entertaining their congregation in order to increase and maintain membership. Regardless of their takeaways from Gilley himself, the hope would also be that this study provides

them with more information about how certain marketing methods like the ones Wrenn and Webb discuss are perceived by the general public.

Some limitations for this study included the abstract nature of the categories, the sensitivity and complexity of religion, and the abundance of marketing materials provided by each church. First, the things coders looked for were not as straightforward as some coding sessions that look for things nearly everyone can agree upon like the color of someone's skin or a phrase that was present or not present. Despite thorough training, the coders' understanding of each category could have been tainted by their unique perspective, causing differences in what each coder saw. Next, my coders may have been uncomfortable analyzing "religious" material because of a lack of experience with such subjects or they could have been influenced by strong beliefs. Another limitation was the overwhelming amount of church marketing materials that were available. It is possible that a different type of marketing material may have yielded a different result.

Despite the limitations, this study has the potential to be one of the first of many studies to empirically examine church marketing. This future research could be approached in a number of different ways. In sticking with the foundations of this study, one could simply provide more units to be analyzed by coders, creating even more validity for the findings. There might also be a way to look at a church's marketing materials collectively by coding websites and handouts in addition to videos. This kind of research could also give insight into whether certain channels are more suited to certain kinds of messages. Another way could be by changing the method. By using a method such as a survey, one could show videos to participants and receive feedback on whether they perceived different kinds of church marketing messages as persuasive or not.

The purpose of this study was to find whether Dr. Gilley's observations about WCA church marketing were accurate. This was important because not only does Gilley have influence himself but his views seem to represent many of the criticisms with how churches promote themselves in modern times. The ideal conclusion to this study would be that the information discovered encourages some churches, regardless of their stance on Gilley's views, to analyze their own marketing strategies and make sure the messages they send out are the messages they intend.

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