

Has church branding progressed too far?

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Branding is all about claiming distinctiveness. What can your product do that others can't? What looks or feels better than the others? What tastes stand out? Sometimes we treat faith communities the same way.

I visited a congregation on Christmas Eve, one I'll call First Church, that clearly took this distinctive approach to branding their community.

The bulletin stated in bold, right below the church logo: First Church "is progressive in our theology."

As far as I know, they are. The large congregation has an all-female pastoral staff. Rainbow flags adorn their property. They recently hosted a community forum on lessons learned from Ferguson and Staten Island.

I have no doubt the congregation's five pastors are progressive when it comes to social justice issues. Likely, the vast majority of the congregation is happy to follow suit.

Leaving aside the point that in this context "progressive in our theology" is probably just code for "progressive in our approach to social justice," the phrase left me more than a bit uncomfortable.

I'm all for distinct, bold, faith claims. For example, when congregations proclaim they are "open and affirming" of those with all sexual orientations, great! That's a clear and specific claim that likely comes from careful study, much prayer, and a vote of the congregation's leadership. Perfect.

While particular congregational faith claims make sense, such a broad "we are progressive in our theology" line describing a congregation gives me pause.

First, well, umm, I hate to break it to (fellow) progressives but we probably aren't completely right on every issue out there [*gasps]. And, further, we certainly aren't in agreement on every issue. Speaking for a whole church, describing the entire

congregation as “progressive in our theology,” makes me question their priorities—has progressiveness become a god in itself?

Second, it might have just been my mood that day, but the way the bulletin read struck me as saying, in essence, *Sure, some churches are moderate (or worse, conservative), and some churches are boring and staid, but come to our church; we are progressive in our theology!*

This approach absolutely makes distinctive claims about congregational life together, but to what end? Should Christians really be about drawing in new members by defining themselves over and against other Christians? Is this not the ever-present danger of the Protestant movement: always moving away from those with whom we disagree; never moving towards unity with our sisters and brothers in Christ?

It's easy enough to define the Christian church today by drawing lines in the sand, but a more faithful way forward calls on us to cross these ridiculous boundaries so that Christians, left and right, progressive and other, work together in Christian unity. Certainly we must make clear claims. Certainly we will disagree. But that's the point: clearly, with boldness, by citing specific mission and ministry, we can discern what we're called to do together.

So, yes, print a congregational mission statement in the bulletin. Claim, with particularity and distinctiveness, what your congregation is about so that visitors can join God's work in your midst. But be mindful not to turn off progressive visitors with over-generalizations.

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