

Mainline markers: How churches identify themselves

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [March 10, 2009](#) issue

When delegates want to speak at a gathering of my denomination, it's customary for them to stand up and give their name, next give the name of their church, and then say whatever it is they got up to say.

At one of these meetings, delegates began to vie with one another in prefacing the name of their church with various slogans that indicated positions taken or programs organized on one social issue or another. A delegate might preface the name of the church with as many as five or six modifiers or identifiers, including, for example, "multicultural/ multiracial," "accessible-to-all" or "creation-care." Being able to get it all in without pausing to take a breath was rewarded with an outburst of laughter and applause from the delegates.

Each of the slogans summarizes a position on a social or political issue. "Multicultural/multiracial" addresses racial prejudice and multiculturalism; "accessible-to-all," disability concerns; "creation-care," the environment; "open and affirming," sexual orientation; "just- peace," war and peace; and "safe-space," harassment and abuse. Though I am in sympathy with the positions suggested by the slogans, something about the giddy exercise at the meeting and the mounting list of slogans left me uneasy.

Among at least some mainline Protestants, use of these adjectives and identity markers is increasing. At least in part, such usage is an attempt to respond to the perceived dominance and threat of the Christian right and to dissociate our churches from it. The slogans are also a marketing device, an attempt to communicate the identity and commitments of a particular congregation in a time when denominational names no longer seem adequate or helpful.

The exercise strikes me as problematic on two levels. On one level, the up-front bullet points may loom as a barrier to someone looking for a congregation. Instead of a welcome, a menu of slogans may be confusing and discouraging; the message is that if you do not share the stated positions, you really aren't welcome.

I understand that clearly stated positions on these issues are important to many committed Christians and denominational insiders. But while some congregations and denominations seem to believe that the most important thing to say about themselves is where they stand on such issues as sexual orientation, accessibility, the environment, war and peace, gender rights and equality, few outsiders have these matters at the top of their checklist when they seek a church. Instead, they are likely to be experiencing a change or crisis in their lives. Maybe they've just had a baby or have moved from a different town. They've lost a job or begun a marriage. They've bumped up against an addiction or have found that their own internal resources aren't sufficient for the stress and strain of life or work. Thus the act of pressing social issues and positions on outsiders as a calling card may be counterproductive.

A second observation is that a great deal of what we talk about in mainline Protestant congregations these days focuses on us. These strings of slogans and positions are mostly about us—our positions, our values, our commitments and our hoped-for behaviors. As Fleming Rutledge observes, "We have forgotten how to be theological. We have not even noticed that our sermons are anthropo-logical." Rutledge likes to ask her students to pay attention to the subject of their verbs, noting that the subject is often ourselves, our human actions or inactions, our behaviors. How often, she asks, is God the subject of our verbs?

Not long ago I worshiped at an “emerging” church in Seattle (its description). The service began with 15 to 20 minutes of praise music. I was pleased that several of the hymns were traditional favorites set to new music and that most of the music put the focus on God and not us.

The preacher’s sermon, “Who Did Christ Die For?” was about God’s nature and God’s purposes. He drew on scripture, particularly Pauline passages, as well as theologians both ancient and modern, and he went on for nearly an hour. Around me 20- and 30-somethings were taking notes. I walked away wondering two things: whether I could manage a one-hour sermon about God (and not us), and whether my congregation would sit still for such a sermon.

Social-issue positions have an important place in Christian life and discipleship. But first place? Shouldn’t our ethics be, as Calvin maintained, a response to who God is, what God has done and what God is doing? To Christ crucified and Christ raised from the dead?

“We have been led into preaching a Jesus kerygma instead of a Christ kerygma,” says Rutledge. In the Jesus kerygma, Jesus is presented as a guide, a figure to emulate, someone who invites us on a spiritual journey or someone who can teach us lessons. For the most part, the Jesus kerygma is about us, our behaviors and experience.

In contrast, the Christ kerygma is about who God is and what God has done in Christ crucified, risen and ruling. To put it another way, what’s missing in our preaching and in our approach to outsiders is God. Our habit of slipping into slogans and positions suggests a failure of theological nerve. What people are looking for is not more about us, but more about God.