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CREATING CHURCH

ONLINE:

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF FIVE

INTERNET-BASED CHRISTIAN

COMMUNITIES

TIM HUTCHINGS

THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

DURHAM UNIVERSITY

PhD THESIS

2010

CREATING CHURCH ONLINE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF FIVE INTERNET-BASED CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

ABSTRACT

Tim Hutchings

“Online churches” are Internet-based Christian communities, seeking to pursue worship, discussion, friendship, teaching, support, proselytisation and other key religious goals through computer-mediated communication. These online churches are one example of “online religion”, a new kind of digital religious practice that promises to transform worship, authority, community and the construction of identity.

This thesis examines five online churches, representing diverse media, theological traditions, leadership structures and forms of external oversight. Each has created a sizeable congregation and offers forms of worship and community online. I used ethnographic methods to examine these churches with particular attention to media, worship, community and leadership.

I conducted long-term participant observation over the three years of my research, taking part in online and offline activities whenever possible, speaking informally with as many people as possible and interviewing over 100 leaders and members. Survey data and other written materials were also studied where available, including media reports, participant accounts and online blog posts.

My research suggested seven important themes present in each group: mass appeal, the formation of community, spiritual experience, the replication of familiar elements of architecture, liturgy and organisation, the prevalence of local churchgoing among online participants, patterns of internal control and systems of external oversight. Each case study demonstrates the very different negotiations of those themes at work in each group.

In my final chapter, I bring together threads and insights from each case study according to four key dimensions of one common theme: the relationship between digital and everyday life. Online churches deliberately replicate familiar elements of everyday activity, become part of the everyday, remain carefully distinct from the everyday and become distinctively digital. We must attend to all four of these layers to adequately understand and evaluate what takes place online, and what role that online activity plays in everyday religious lives.

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DECLARATION

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will be submitted in 2010, the 25th anniversary of a significant event in the brief history of religion and the Internet: the appearance of the earliest recorded online church, launched in 1985.¹ Hundreds of congregations have now emerged online, appropriating every form of new media to support worship, prayer, friendship, discussion, teaching and evangelism. Churches can be found high in the skies of virtual worlds, streaming sermons from local congregations, connecting through social network sites, or debating ideas in forums and chatrooms; some attract a dozen congregants, while others preach to tens of thousands.

The last six years have seen an explosive new vitality among online churches, blossoming from a few low-profile ventures to capture global attention. This thesis seeks to chart some of that vitality through ethnography, conducting detailed participant observation with many interviews to try to understand what takes place in these online groups, who joins them, and why. Ethnography requires long-term personal involvement in group life and repeated conversations with members, and allows the researcher to explore the perceptions and practices of a group in great depth and richness. This flexible, contextual approach is particularly well-suited to the study of communities, engaging directly with participants' experiences, perceptions, relationships and activities, and is ideal for exploring relatively unknown areas of social activity like online religion, offering the chance to spend time learning what matters to participants before highlighting key themes for analysis.

I studied five online churches in total, and discuss them in chronological order: Church of Fools; i-church; St Pixels; The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life; and Church Online, an “online campus” run by LifeChurch.tv. These five examples of online religion differ in size, activity, media, leadership style, theology and institutional oversight, offering opportunities for wide-ranging comparative analysis.

¹ Church of England Board of Social Responsibility, *Cybernavts Awake!* (London: Church House Publishing, 1999) Chapter 5, <http://www.starcourse.org/cybernavts/index.html>. Accessed 16-03-07

Certain key themes quickly drew my interest. Worship, community and authority are all crucial issues for Christian churches, and each is replicated and transformed in complex and diverse ways online. My discussion of each case study emphasises these themes, seeking to demonstrate the pressures and dynamics guiding negotiation of each topic.

The whole thesis, however, works toward a larger goal: tracing the many dimensions of the relationship between digital and everyday life. It is this multi-layered, multi-faceted relationship that inspires, drives and shapes online activity, including online religion. I soon discovered that “going to an online church” can only be understood if we pay attention to what else is going on in the life of the churchgoer, and this thesis seeks to investigate the many levels of that embeddedness. My final chapter, “The Digital and the Everyday”, will bring together insights from all my case studies to show commonalities and contrast distinctive features in light of this overarching theme. As online church-building continues to gather pace, the framework of analysis I offer should help future researchers document and assess the increasingly diverse, vibrant projects that emerge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online religion is constantly changing, and those who seek to research it are seldom discussing quite the same groups or practices as their predecessors or successors. This review seeks to set each contribution in context by combining references to literature with a history of online churches, so the reader can compare the evolution of discussion with that of the practices being discussed.

A narrow focus has been adopted to limit the volume of material considered. I have focused primarily on published academic work directly relevant to the study of online churches. The history of the Internet itself has been comprehensively outlined elsewhere² and will not be rehearsed here. Many classic and recent texts in the study of new media, religion and media, sociology of religion, congregational studies and ethnographic methodology have been invaluable for my research, and media coverage and online discussions have also been of interest, but these sources will be introduced in the main thesis and bibliography where appropriate.

FIRST STEPS: 1985-1994

The Church of England document *Cybernavts Awake!*³ refers to the earliest online church I have discovered, launched in 1985. The founders ‘claimed that for the first time people could worship in spirit and in truth’, free from the distractions of others who might – in their own words – be ‘fat, short, beautiful or ugly. People are pared down to pure spirit.’⁴ *Cybernavts* doesn’t name this church, unfortunately, and I have found no other reference to it.

² See, for example, Paul E. Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing* (London: The MIT Press, 2000)

³ Church of England Board for Social Responsibility, *Cybernavts Awake! Ethical and Spiritual Implications of Computers, Information Technology and the Internet* (London: Church House 1999).

⁴ *Ibid.*, Chapter 5

Other traces are recorded in David Lochhead's *Shifting Realities: Information Technology and the Church*.⁵ In 1986 the owners of the Unison service hosting the Presbyterian discussion network Presbynet approached them 'to ask if they could organise something online'⁶ in response to the Challenger disaster. Presbynet organised 'a memorial liturgy with prayers, scripture, meditation and a section in which readers could add their own prayers', followed by a time of open discussion. The service, Lochhead writes, 'demonstrated the power of the computer medium to unite a community in a time of crisis beyond the limits of geography or denomination.'

Another record of early online activity can be found in 'The Lessons of LucasFilm's Habitat', by Chip Morningstar and F. Randall Farmer.⁷ "Habitat" ran from 1986 to 1988 and was the first graphical multiplayer world, offering a simple 2D interface. Characters could steal from or kill one another; on dying, the victim would re-appear empty-handed in their 'home' space and any objects dropped could be collected by others. Participants hotly debated questions of identity, violence, death and discipline, and this dispute led to a small milestone for online religion:

One of the outstanding proponents of the anti-violence point of view was motivated to open the first Habitat church, the Order of the Holy Walnut (in real life he was a Greek Orthodox priest). His canons forbid his disciples to carry weapons, steal, or participate in violence of any kind. His church became quite popular and he became a very highly respected member of the Habitat community.⁸

It is unclear what this church did, if anything; it may simply have been an organisation sharing an ethical code of non-violence. Nonetheless, the Holy Walnut was the first church founded in a graphically-represented environment. The satirical humour evident

⁵ David Lochhead, *Shifting Realities: Information Technology and the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997).

⁶ Ibid. p.52

⁷ Chip Morningstar and F. Randall Farmer, "The Lessons of LucasFilms' Habitat," in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, ed. Michael Benedikt (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991).

⁸ Ibid. Available online at <http://www.fudco.com/chip/lessons.html>. Accessed 10-01-10

in the name would become a recurrent feature of online churchmanship and, indeed, of the Internet as a whole.

ONLINE CHURCH REACHES THE WEB: 1994-2000

The potential uses of the Internet expanded dramatically with the invention of the World Wide Web in 1990. Websites could offer graphics, text and hyperlinks, and online communities – including online churches – began to develop from the early email discussion lists and local BBSs into more complex and sophisticated forms. The first classic publications begin to appear in this decade, documenting the communities and cultures emerging online; Steven Jones' edited collections *CyberSociety*⁹ and *CyberSociety 2.0*¹⁰ and Marc Smith and Peter Kollock's *Communities in Cyberspace*¹¹ were all particularly formative for my own first studies.

The first church to be created on a website is generally held to be the 'First Church of Cyberspace', launched in 1994.¹² Charles Henderson, a Presbyterian minister in New Jersey, sought to establish an online congregation through the use of discussion forums and an always-open chatroom in which services were held once a day; members could also access images, music and a multimedia online Bible.¹³

Partenia also launched in the mid-90s, promoting the social views of controversial Roman Catholic bishop Jacques Gaillot.¹⁴ Gaillot was moved by the Vatican from the see of Evreux in France to Partenia in Algeria, a diocese that vanished under the desert in the 5th

⁹ Steven G. Jones, ed. *CyberSociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (London: Sage, 1995).

¹⁰ Steven G. Jones, ed. *CyberSociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (London: Sage, 1998)

¹¹ Peter Kollock and Marc Smith, eds., *Communities in Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹² According to information posted to the new website of the FCC, *GodWeb*, <http://www.godweb.org/>, accessed 10-03-07; Heidi Campbell dates the launch of FCC earlier, to 1992. See Heidi Campbell, "Religion and the Internet," *Communication Research Trends* 26, no. 1 (2006). p2

¹³ *The Web Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/19991013120229/http://godweb.org/>, shows the website as it was on 13-10-99. Accessed 14-03-07.

¹⁴ *Partenia*, www.partenia.org. Accessed 10-03-07

century. Taking up residence among immigrants in Paris, he chose instead to interpret “Partenia” as a symbol for all those excluded from society.¹⁵ The site soon attracted a worldwide following, with areas in seven languages dedicated to forums, chat and Gaillot’s views. Partenia refers to itself as a “virtual diocese”, but does not seem to consider itself a “virtual church”; nor does “St Sam’s”, an Anglican “cyberparish” email list founded in 1988 and documented by Heidi Campbell.¹⁶

Time Magazine published one of the first accounts of online religion, a cover story from December 1996 entitled “Finding God on the Web”.¹⁷ The authors discuss websites, chatrooms and newsgroups from around the world, suggest that computer communication could bring different groups together, and quote Gaillot, who ‘marvels at the freedom he enjoys loosed from the hierarchy of the church. “On the Internet there is no question of someone imposing rules on the way people communicate,” he says. “The Net has no center from which will can be applied.”’¹⁸ Hypertext connections between words and phrases in sacred texts will give rise to a new kind of “hypertheology”, with thousands of different interpretations accessible at a mouse click. The authors reach striking, provocative and rather poetic conclusions: ‘we stand at the start of a new movement in this delicate dance of technology and faith’, they suggest, ‘the marriage of God and the global computer networks.’¹⁹ ‘Will the Net change religion? Is it possible that God in a networked age will look, somehow, different?’ The Internet, like God, is ‘an entity so much greater than the sum of its parts as to inspire awe and wonder’, and could be a new metaphor for the divine, encouraging theologies of change, process and connection. ‘Interconnected, we may begin to find God in places we never imagined.’²⁰

This article is largely speculative, but raised some of the key issues that have continued to puzzle scholars and commentators ever since. How, for example, does the Internet affect religious authority? Are certain theological traditions more compatible with

¹⁵ http://www.partenia.org/english/biographie_eng.htm, accessed 10-03-07

¹⁶ Campbell, "Religion and the Internet." p4

¹⁷ Joshua Cooper Ramo, "Finding God on the Web," *TIME*, 16 December 1996.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,985700.html>. Accessed 10-01-10

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p3

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p6

²⁰ *Ibid.* p7

the Internet than others? Does online activity affect religious belief? What does change when a sacred text is read online, with hypertext connections?

A number of researchers and commentators began to pay attention to online religion at around this time, attending particularly to neo-pagan and Christian online rituals. Erik Davis described a new movement of “technopagans” for *Wired* magazine in 1995, interviewing practitioners who sought to reimagine forms of nature worship to include a spiritual understanding of cyberspace.²¹ Steven O’Leary’s ‘Cyberspace as Sacred Space’, 1996, was the first article published by an academic journal and focused on neo-pagan virtual rituals, observing the textual means used to suggest real-world surroundings within which participants were to imagine the ritual occurring.²²

Journalist Jeff Zaleski published a wide-ranging survey of online activity in 1997, entitled *The Soul of Cyberspace*.²³ “It’s possible”, he suggested, “that in the long run the Internet will favour those religions and spiritual teachings that tend toward anarchy and lack a complex hierarchy.”²⁴ The Vatican’s then-new website committed “the two cardinal sins” by omitting any links or opportunities for interaction; such “cyber-religion from a mountain-top enclave ... does not bode well for the future of the Roman Catholic Church online”.²⁵

In 1998, Ralph Schroeder, Noel Heather and Raymond M. Lee wrote the first academic article explicitly concerned with Christian Internet use, analysing discourse within a virtual world they called ‘E-Church’.²⁶ ‘E-Church’ was a small charismatic group, holding a weekly prayer meeting in a 3D environment including a church building. Schroeder notes the persistence of standard forms of language through which ‘the “genre” of a real-world

²¹ Erik Davis, "Technopagans: May the astral plane be reborn in cyberspace," *Wired*, July 1995.

²² Stephen D. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (London: Routledge, 2004). First published in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no.4, 1996.

²³ Jeff Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology is Changing Our Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p111

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p128

²⁶ Ralph Schroeder, Noel Heather, and Raymond M. Lee, "The Sacred and the Virtual: Religion in Multi-User Virtual Reality," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 4, no. 2 (1998).

prayer meeting was constantly invoked’, with a high degree of liturgical patterning. The presence of a female prayer group leader is in keeping with the house group atmosphere, rather than indicating any transformation of authority. The online setting did affect conversation patterns: ‘the novel combination of notional anonymity and intimacy which the virtual reality world fosters led in this case to a surprisingly open airing of major personal problems.’

A number of monographs published in the 1990s sought to discuss the potential of the Internet in theological terms. Patrick Dixon’s *Cyberchurch: Christianity and the Internet*,²⁷ 1997, defines “cyberchurch” in two ways: as ‘the body of all Christians who interact using global computer networks’, or as ‘an electronically linked group of believers, aiming to reproduce in cyberspace some aspects of conventional church life.’²⁸ The Internet ‘represents a massive evangelistic opportunity’, he argues, particularly for reaching into countries hostile to the gospel²⁹; it also offers a potentially vast library of resources and opportunities for online worship. Dixon emphasises the dangers of ‘a superficial Christianity without any human obligations’³⁰, a spectre he feels the Internet may encourage. The Internet puts the user, rather than God, in control of activity, offers the possibility of escape from any potentially disagreeable situation, and could become the sole source of Christian interaction for many believers. This is unbiblical and inadequate: ‘the Internet can never replace face-to-face human relationships – never be a substitute for fellowship and Christian community.’³¹ “Online churches”, clearly, are out of the question.

Dixon, like Time Magazine, suggests that the omnipresence, universality and invisibility of the Internet could teach us much about God. This is the central argument of Jennifer Cobb’s *Cybergrace*, 1998.³² Seeking for a way to integrate her work as a computer consultant with her spiritual experiences, Cobb looks to the process theology of John Cobb Jr and the evolutionary theology of Teilhard de Chardin to suggest a view of the divine luring

²⁷ Patrick Dixon, *Cyberchurch: Christianity and the Internet* (Eastborne: Kingsway Publications, 1997).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.17

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.69

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.93

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.156

³² Jennifer Cobb, *Cybergrace: The Search for God in the Digital World* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998).

all things to itself through creativity and novelty. Cyberspace is an active participant in evolution, a claim Cobb supports with observations of self-driven evolution and creativity within digital programs. Any negative potential of cyberspace is almost entirely ignored. The potential of cyberspace to isolate users is seen as a matter of misunderstanding, rectified as soon as ‘we learn to engage the sacred dynamic of our relationship with the digital’³³ as co-evolvers³⁴ moving towards ever-higher levels of order, complexity and richness of experience.

Tom Beaudoin’s *Virtual Faith*,³⁵ also 1998, offered further speculation regarding the effects of cyberspace within a more rigorous academic discussion of contemporary religion. Beaudoin ranges widely across contemporary culture and makes three points regarding the religious use of cyberspace. First, the Internet can foster ‘a radically pluralistic space’ that could lead ‘to a relativising of religions and their truth claims’³⁶. This is appropriate to contemporary culture, characterised by radical experimentation with irony, heresy and the subverting of respected institutions and symbols. Second, the search for speed and full presence in cyberspace furthers quests for personal interaction and transcendence of experience, offering a metaphor for the divine and a ‘deeply theologically compelling’ medium for spiritual exploration.³⁷ Third, the ephemerality and user-directedness of website and hypertext may affect the way users relate to the material they discover. The experience of flicking from website to website may undermine ideas of absolute truth and permanence, while hypertext highlights the role of the reader in constructing understanding. ‘It is impossible to have a sacred text in cyberspace: a cyberBible is always wandering.’³⁸

1998 also saw the publication of an influential, much-quoted survey by the Barna Group. In their report, provocatively entitled “The Cyberchurch is Coming”,³⁹ the authors

³³ Ibid., p.15

³⁴ Ibid., p.221

³⁵ Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

³⁶ Ibid., p.57

³⁷ Ibid., p.87

³⁸ Ibid., p.126

³⁹ "The Cyberchurch is Coming," (The Barna Research Group, 1998).

<http://web.archive.org/web/19991010051101/http://www.barna.org/PressCyberChurch.htm>. Accessed 10-01-10.

prophesied the end of local churchgoing: ‘Fifteen years from now you may tell your grandchildren that back in the old days, when people wanted a religious experience they attended a church for that purpose. Chances are good that your grandchildren will be shocked by such a revelation.’ According to George Barna, ‘Our research indicates that by 2010 we will probably have 10% to 20% of the population relying primarily or exclusively upon the Internet for its religious input.’ In fact, the survey offered very little evidence for such claims. 4% of the 620 teenagers interviewed said they had used the Internet to find ‘a religious or spiritual experience’, the lowest of all the uses surveyed. The headline-grabbing 10-20% predictions were based instead on what these teens said about their expectations for the future: ‘One out of six teens (16%) said that within the next five years they expect to use the Internet as a substitute for their current church-based religious experience’, rising to one in three among African-Americans.

Few of these authors include much discussion of the actual online churches operating at the time they were writing, but some examples can still be found online. Dixon lists nine,⁴⁰ and a student researcher listed 38 examples between 1997 and 2000.⁴¹ “Alpha Church”⁴² was founded in 1998 by Patricia Walker, a Methodist minister who ‘transferred to non-denominational status’ to lead the project.⁴³ Alpha Church continues to offer sermons, worship services and Holy Communion today through recorded resources to be read, streamed or downloaded by the visitor. The visitor is encouraged to email the pastor for prayer, Confession and Absolution. The website also offers baptisms, to be arranged by webcam with a Christian friend in attendance to administer the water. Holy Communion involves eating and drinking at the computer screen, following recorded instructions, but creating an appropriate environment is encouraged:

During the Communion-Eucharist service the elements will be blessed/sanctified and you will eat and drink them. You may light a candle nearby to represent the light of Christ. Background music is included with the service of Holy Communion. Turn

⁴⁰Dixon, *Cyberchurch.*, p.182

⁴¹ Arne H. Fjeldstad, 'Communicating Christ on the Internet: Cyberchurches', <http://www.geocities.com/ResearchTriangle/1541/cybchur.html>. Accessed 16 June 2007.

⁴² ‘Alpha Church’, www.alphachurch.org. Accessed 10-01-10

⁴³ ‘About Your Pastor’. <http://www.alphachurch.org/bio-walker.htm>. Accessed 10-01-10

your speaker volume to a medium level. Read aloud with the responses during the Service. You may take Holy Communion as often as you wish. The service is changed periodically.⁴⁴

A similar approach is offered by Greg Neal, another Methodist pastor in the United States, who launched “Grace Incarnate Ministries” online in 1999.⁴⁵ Rev Neal offers sermons and videos and encourages visitors to take Communion by eating and drinking while watching his recorded material. He promotes a high sacramental theology, defending his position with a series of essays.

‘WebChurch: The WorldWide Virtual Church from Scotland’⁴⁶, the first online church to open in the UK, first appeared in 1999 offering articles, sermons and other resources. Like the ministries described above, WebChurch encourages visitors to email the pastor with their prayer requests. Any prayers received will be passed on to volunteers and remembered for a week.⁴⁷

Margaret Wertheim’s *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* (1999)⁴⁸ analyses the discourse of Internet pioneers and argues that they present cyberspace as ‘an idealized realm “above” and “beyond” the problems of a troubled material world... an attempt to realize a technological substitute for the Christian space of “Heaven”.’⁴⁹ This pursuit of transcendence has greatly concerned a number of Christian commentators. Is the online believer trying to escape from the material and human world created and redeemed by God? Is an online “community”, however unwittingly, therefore blasphemous and sub-human? Criticisms like these have emerged time and again throughout the history of online activity – note, for example, Dixon’s attempts to balance his praise for the Internet with attacks on online

⁴⁴ ‘Alpha Church Services of Holy Communion Eucharist’. <http://www.alphachurch.org/holycomm.htm>. Accessed 10-01-10

⁴⁵ ‘Grace Incarnate Ministries’, www.revneal.org. Accessed 10-01-10

⁴⁶ ‘WebChurch’, www.webchurch.org. Accessed 15-03-07

⁴⁷ ‘WebChurch Prayer Power’, <http://www.webchurch.org/pray.htm>. Accessed 10-01-10

⁴⁸ Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (London: Virago Press, 1999).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.16-17

relationships. Douglas Groothuis, a philosopher, is even more negative in *The Soul in Cyberspace* (1997).⁵⁰ All online media offer opportunities, but also dangers. Cyberspace is ‘disembodied, impermanent, and largely impersonal’, and therefore not suited to Christian community, discipleship or evangelism. ‘Embodied spiritual community’ is irreplaceable.⁵¹

One of the first official denominational responses to the Internet appeared in 1999, when the Church of England’s Board for Social Responsibility published *Cybernavts Awake!*.⁵² The report ranged widely over issues of community, personhood, physicality, privacy and economics, and took a critical but generally affirming stance. Online relationships are real, but incomplete – any ‘fully and truly human’ relationship ‘ought to include, at least potentially, every aspect of human presence, which means that the physical dimension should be includable.’⁵³ A list of Christian principles for Internet use is included at the heart of the report, emphasising the need for compassion and gentleness but highlighting the dangers of instant gratification, the potential for anonymity to lead to inconsiderateness and the danger that cyberspace might distract attention from the struggles of the majority of the world’s population.

2000-2003: RESEARCH GATHERS PACE (“THE SECOND WAVE”)

An influential collection appeared in 2000: *Religion on the Internet*, edited by Jeffrey Hadden and Douglas Cowan.⁵⁴ Articles address conceptual issues, research methods, Usenet, websites for major religious organizations, mainstream Protestant Internet use, Islam, new religious movements and religious education, among other themes. None directly address online churches, but some highly relevant observations are offered. Douglas Cowan offers an account of academic discussions of new religious movements on Usenet, and observes that

⁵⁰ Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p159

⁵² Church of England Board for Social Responsibility, *Cybernavts Awake! Ethical and Spiritual Implications of Computers, Information Technology and the Internet*. (London: Church House, 1999). <http://www.starcourse.org/cybernavts/index.html>. Accessed 16-03-07

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Chapter 5

⁵⁴ Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan, eds., *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (London: JAI Press, 2000).

‘the Internet has provided an opportunity unparalleled in communications history for the establishment of authoritative voice’⁵⁵ – the high profile of rhetoric undermining the perceived democratic tendencies of the medium, and suggesting more potential for creating and maintaining hierarchy, leadership and teaching than some previous scholars had assumed. Ken Bedell searched for a year for evidence of new religious forms, but was disappointed: ‘Contrary to what I anticipated, there was little evidence of widespread use of the Internet to form new religious communities or support new spiritual practices.’⁵⁶ Users looked for religious information and contacted their friends. There were attempts by clergy to create Internet ministries, but ‘while these sometimes have very loyal followings, I was unable to identify any with large followings.’⁵⁷ Bedell suggests that perhaps ‘the sharing of spirituality on the Internet is much more intimate’,⁵⁸ operating among informal friendship networks.

The most influential article in this collection has proven to be Christopher Helland’s “Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas”.⁵⁹ He argues that ‘two distinct forms of religious participation’⁶⁰ have emerged online. Religion-Online seeks to continue institutional structures through controlled one-to-many communication, while Online-Religion involves online communities of free, unsupervised interaction, focused around a shared ideology or entirely unrestricted. Other scholars quickly adjusted this typology, setting aside the emphasis on continuity and control and foregrounding participation instead. Hadden and Cowan begin this process in their introduction, suggesting that “religion online” and “online religion” should be understood as offering “information about” and “participation in” religion, ‘with the e-space itself acting as the church, temple, synagogue, mosque, and grove’.⁶¹ They acknowledge that these categories are not always distinct, pointing to Partenia.org as an example: a site that provides information, but also operates as a virtual diocese.

⁵⁵ Douglas E. Cowan, "Religion, Rhetoric, and Scholarship: Managing Vested Interest in Cyberspace", in *Religion on the Internet*, p108

⁵⁶ Ken Bedell, "Dispatches from the Electronic Frontier: Explorations of Mainline Protestant Uses of the Internet," in *Religion on the Internet*, p183

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p196

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p199

⁵⁹ Christopher Helland, "Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas," in *Religion on the Internet*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p220

⁶¹ Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan, "The Promised Land or Electronic Chaos? Toward Understanding Religion on the Internet," in *Religion on the Internet*, p10

The Pew Internet and American Life Project has published a number of influential reports regarding online religion, including “Wired Churches, Wired Temples” in 2000.⁶² A survey of 1300 congregations indicated that ‘the Internet has become a vital force in many faith communities’, mainly delivering sermons and information rather than ‘interactive features such as spiritual discussions, online prayer, or fundraising’. “CyberFaith”,⁶³ 2001, claimed that 25% of Internet users had looked for spiritual or religious information online, 3 million every day, and surveyed 500 of these “Religion Surfers” in search of more detailed information. ‘The most popular online religious activities are solitary ones’, but surfers also communicated with friends and strangers. 38%, for example, had sent prayer requests by email. ‘For Religion Surfers, the Internet is a useful supplemental tool that enhances their already-deep commitment to their beliefs and their churches, synagogues, or mosques.’ Variations in faith history and affiliation affected these results: converts were more likely to be Religion Surfers, while those who perceived themselves to be in a minority or discriminated against were ‘particularly interested in using the Internet to meet others of their own faith and share items of religious interest’.

The Barna Group also released a report in 2001, repeating the striking predictions made in 1998 despite the Pew data to the contrary.⁶⁴ ‘Among the growing number of Americans who use the Internet’, the authors wrote, ‘millions are turning to the digital dimension to get them in touch with God and others who pursue faith matters. The report projects that within this decade as many as 50 million individuals may rely solely upon the Internet to provide all of their faith-based experiences.’ ‘By the end of the decade we will have in excess of ten percent of our population who rely upon the Internet for their entire spiritual experience. Some of them will be individuals who have not had a connection with a faith community, but millions of others will be people who drop out of the physical church in favor of the cyberchurch.’ Religion was not actually a popular form of Internet use among the

⁶² Elena Larsen, "Wired Churches, Wired Temples," (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000). <http://www.pewInternet.org/Reports/2000/Wired-Churches-Wired-Temples.aspx>. Accessed 10-01-10

⁶³ Elena Larsen, "CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online," (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2001). <http://www.pewInternet.org/Reports/2001/CyberFaith-How-Americans-Pursue-Religion-Online.aspx>. Accessed 10-01-10

⁶⁴ "More Americans Are Seeking Net-Based Faith Experiences," (The Barna Group, 2001). <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/48-more-americans-are-seeking-net-based-faith-experiences>. Accessed 10-01-10.

survey respondents, and less than 1% of adults were actually trying to replace their local church online, but the study explained that ‘people are in the early stages of warming up to the idea of cyberfaith’ - two thirds of respondents said they expected to use the Internet religiously later in the decade.

Brenda Brasher’s 2001 monograph *Give Me That Online Religion*⁶⁵ presented a wide-ranging overview and discussed the effects of cyberspace on issues of time, ethics, entertainment, cyborgs and apocalypticism. Claiming online religion of all forms was rapidly growing, Brasher goes even further than Barna to suggest that ‘using a computer for online religious activity could become the dominant form of religion and religious experience in the next century’.⁶⁶

The Catholic Church released two reports in 2002. ‘Ethics in Internet’⁶⁷ focused on Christian attitudes to media use, while ‘The Church and Internet’⁶⁸ discussed appropriate strategies for the Church. The latter affirms the Internet as a ‘gift of God’, like all media, intended to ‘unite men in brotherhood’,⁶⁹ with particular value for catechesis, evangelism, resource access and ‘virtual communities of faith’.⁷⁰ The authors also express concern about the presence of ‘hate sites’, and about the ‘proliferation of web sites calling themselves Catholic’ that favour ‘eccentric’ doctrines and practices. Online church is ruled out altogether. The Internet may complement and enrich religious life, but ‘The virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and liturgy or the immediate and direct proclamation of the Gospel’.⁷¹ ‘Even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world

⁶⁵ Brenda Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004)

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.19

⁶⁷ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, ‘Ethics in Internet’ (2002).
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html. Accessed 12-12-05

⁶⁸ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, ‘The Church and Internet’ (2002)
www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-Internet_en.html. Accessed 12-12-05

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.1

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.2

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.3

interaction with other persons of faith.’ The task of the Catholic is to lead believers ‘from cyberspace to true community’,⁷² enriched by but not constituted through the Internet.

2002 also saw the release of *Unweaving the Web*,⁷³ a Grove Ethics booklet by David Clough. Clough examines theological interpretations of technology, place and human personhood, and highlights a number of key critiques, including the ‘digital divide’, the use of technology for surveillance and control and the potential for anonymity to undermine responsibility. ‘Whatever we learn from the Internet about personhood,’ he concludes, ‘it cannot be that this irresponsibility is a legitimate part of being human.’⁷⁴

The journal *Religion* published a special issue on the Internet in 2002, including six articles offering attention to paganism, Native American religion, online Christian pilgrimages and conceptual discussion. Helland’s “Surfing for Salvation”⁷⁵ repeats his distinction of religion-online from online-religion according to control and participation but offers some further developments. The one-way communication of religion-online is the norm for traditional, hierarchical religions, Helland argues, and involves seeing the web as a “tool”; online-religion includes all forms of many-to-many communication, including prayer and worship, and involves seeing the Internet as a “place” where one could “do” religion. Two other articles continue the debate. Anastasia Karaflogka distinguishes “religion on cyberspace” from “religion in cyberspace”, the first referring to information-provision and the second to “cyberreligions” which exist ‘exclusively in cyberspace’.⁷⁶ Patrick Maxwell redefines “religion online” as a broad category for all religious activity and uses “online religion” to describe that subset involving actual religious practice.⁷⁷

2004-5: ONLINE CHURCH GOES MAINSTREAM

⁷² Ibid., p.4

⁷³ David Clough, *Unweaving the Web: Beginning to Think Theologically About the Internet* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd., 2002)

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.22

⁷⁵ Christopher Helland, "Surfing for Salvation," *Religion* 32, no. 4 (2002).

⁷⁶ Anastasia Karaflogka, "Religious Discourse and Cyberspace," *Religion* 32, no. 4 (2002)., p286

⁷⁷ Patrick Maxwell, "Virtual Religion in Context," *Religion* 32, no. 4 (2002)., p349

2004 was a key year in the history of the online church. Early online churches were small, and theological and sociological discussions relied more on speculation and assumption than real experience. This all changed in 2004, although – as we shall see – scholarly analysis lagged some years behind.

Three new website churches launched within months of one another, each a significant new advance in the field. Vurch received some interest for its attractive, multimedia design and its emphasis on personal meditation.⁷⁸ Fulfilling the worst fears of Patrick Dixon and the Vatican, Vurch created the provocative slogan ‘Don’t Go to Church: Go to Vurch.Com’.

Greater media attention was drawn to the other two big launches of the year, however – the Methodist-funded Church of Fools⁷⁹ in May and the Church of England’s i-church.org⁸⁰ in August. Each had a unique attraction. i-church was an official part of the Diocese of Oxford, one of their new Cutting Edge Ministries schemes, and boasted its own authorized, paid web pastor. When the diocese advertised nationally for applicants for the post, applications arrived from around the world. A pastor from Scotland was eventually appointed in June – only to resign in November, citing excessive time pressure.⁸¹ The diocese had drastically underestimated the appeal of their innovation, seeing i-church as a community for the Oxford area, and was stunned when people tried to register from all over the world. Under a new pastor, appointed from within the membership, i-church closed its doors, stabilised its community, and began a much slower rate of growth. By 2009 a third pastor had been appointed, with long experience in local and online ministry, a support team to help with site design and a close working relationship with the Oxford-based Trustees, and a more creative, outward-looking period of church life was underway.

⁷⁸ “Vurch”, www.vurch.com. Accessed 16-03-07

⁷⁹ “Church of Fools”, www.churchoffools.com. Accessed 16-03-07

⁸⁰ “i-church”, www.i-church.org. Accessed 16-03-07

⁸¹ ‘i-church changes gear’, <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/thedoor/i-church-update.html>. Accessed 16-03-07

Church of Fools also encountered public and media interest, but a very different set of challenges. The church was designed by Ship of Fools⁸² in consultation with a number of well-known virtual world experts, and was able to draw on a greater wealth of online experience and programming expertise. A 3D virtual world was constructed in which avatars could walk, sit, perform certain gestures and communicate through text. The Bishop of London helped fund the project and delivered the opening sermon. Average daily attendance over the first weeks was some 7500, with a peak of 41,000. Journalists from around the world were attracted by the novelty of the experiment and its high-profile backers. Visitors soon came with malicious intentions, seeking to hack the site's software and disrupt its services, and this led to further coverage and an even greater surge of visitors. After four months, one month longer than planned, the church finally closed. The community remained active, communicating through forums and chatrooms at a new website. In 2006, the church moved to a new website, St Pixels, offering redesigned forums, a more advanced chatroom and a blog for every member.

Alongside these three high-profile website churches, another significant development for online churches received less attention. The 3D virtual world Second Life launched in 2003 and soon began to feature spaces for religious activity. Second Life offers opportunities for socializing in a vast range of settings, from clothing boutiques to nightclubs, all constructed by players using a basic range of tools. Items can be sold for in-world currency that can be traded for real-world dollars. Registering is free and there is no monthly access charge, but land must be rented from the world's owners, Linden Labs, or from in-world real estate dealers. This innovative system attracted intense media coverage, which in turn fuelled a rush of new visitors including well-known companies, universities, politicians and pop stars. Publicity, high membership, free access and flexible design all made Second Life an obvious target for online religion, and a large number of churches started to appear.

Wagner James Au, then Linden Labs' official journalist, blogged about a church in Second Life in April 2004 – one month before Church of Fools.⁸³ On arriving at his

⁸² "Ship of Fools", www.shipoffools.com. Accessed 16-03-07

⁸³ Wagner James Au, 'Where Two or More are Gathered...' http://secondlife.blogs.com/nwn/2004/04/where_two_or_mo.html Accessed 16-03-07

destination, a traditionally-styled church building, Au finds ‘something very much like an authentic Catholic mass already in progress. A man named OmegaX Zapata is at the altar, and he's dressed in priestly garments, and he's reciting the liturgy’. The consecration and sharing of bread and wine is replaced by a question-and-answer session, but otherwise the service is as traditional as possible. Zapata, however, is not a priest, nor indeed a Catholic; his motive is partly educational, partly religious. ‘I wanted to bring more real-world things into SL’, he explains, ‘so people could experience them if they couldn't in real life’, but ‘the point of the church isn't to be just Catholic. It is to bring us together in praise of God.’ This was not the first in-world church, according to Au: a short-lived Episcopalian space had given away virtual T-shirts bearing the slogan “Jesus Had a Second Life Too”.

Calculating the number of active churches in Second Life is difficult. The world offers search programs that can be used to locate groups, places or events, and searching for key terms like “church”, “chapel”, “Christian” or “Jesus” brings up extensive lists, but there is no guarantee that every place or event will be listed or that listings are accurate and up-to-date. Many places listed as “churches” turn out on closer inspection to be shops, nightclubs, chapels for “virtual weddings”, art projects, historical reconstructions or mock-ups designed to add “authenticity” to a themed village or mall. Other spaces seem to have been designed as churches, but never attract a congregation; Douglas Estes found notices attached to empty buildings promising to hold a service if anyone contacted the owner to request one.⁸⁴ Andree Robinson-Neal found 28 churches in October 2007 by searching for “church”, “faith” and “worship”.⁸⁵ Other estimates are much higher. One Scandinavian Protestant handed me his own list of Christian ministries in February 2008, running to some 52 sites, almost all evangelical. A High Anglican composed a list of 36 in December of that year, looking only at Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican spaces. ‘Some of these places have actual worshipping congregations,’ he wrote, but ‘others are there for people to pop in from time to time to say a prayer, and still others seem to be simply impressive examples of art. This list is offered with the hope that people will go around and pray in these places.’ Note again the complexity of clearly designating a site as “church”, when visitors, designers and owners may perceive and use a space quite differently. My own Second Life inventory contains 106 landmarks for

⁸⁴ Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*. p147

⁸⁵ Andree Robinson-Neal, "Enhancing the Spiritual Relationship: The Impact of Virtual Worship on the Real-World Church Experience," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 03, no. 1 (2008). p228

places offering some kind of Christian worship or claiming to be a church, collected during 2008 and 2009, and this was not a complete list; some may have been missed, some have moved or disappeared since I visited, and more new projects will have been launched by the time you read this.

In 2004, this explosion of church-building was only just beginning. Another important edited volume was published in that year, *Religion Online*, edited by Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan,⁸⁶ but none of the contributors address the emerging issues posed by virtual worlds or the first large-scale online churches. Pew's "CyberFaith" report is republished, while O'Leary's "Cyberspace as Sacred Space" and a 1999 article about recruiting among new religious movements⁸⁷ appear in slightly edited form. New chapters address religious identities, mainstream religions, new religions and religious quests. Helland's chapter on popular religion suggests the Web is ideally suited for individual, idiosyncratic religious expressions.⁸⁸ Stephen D. O'Leary's updated contribution examines transcripts of online pagan rituals, observing a strong desire to recreate physical space through textual description and to set aside parts of cyberspace as sacred, noting the obvious artificiality of such strategies, and predicting a return of imagery and sound as rituals move to websites and 3D virtual spaces.⁸⁹ The editors' introduction⁹⁰ and Glenn Young's chapter⁹¹ both suggest that Helland's religion-online and online-religion should be understood as opposite ends of a spectrum. Young's article is particularly helpful, emphasising the continuity of the two categories and reminding the reader that information cannot always be distinguished from participation, nor online from offline. An online statement of faith blurs the former distinction, and a live broadcast of a ritual blurs the latter.

⁸⁶ Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, eds., *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁸⁷ Lorne L. Dawson and Jenna Hennebry, "New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space," in *Religion Online*; originally published in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14 (1999).

⁸⁸ Christopher Helland, "Popular Religion and the World-Wide Web: A Match Made in (Cyber)Heaven," in *Religion Online*

⁸⁹ O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks." In *Religion Online*

⁹⁰ Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, "Introduction," in *Religion Online*

⁹¹ Glenn Young, "Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity," in *Religion Online*

The Pew Internet and American Life Project released another key report in 2004, entitled "Faith Online".⁹² The authors, Stewart Hoover, Lynn Schofield Clark and Lee Rainie, reported the striking discovery that '64% of wired Americans have used the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes', some 82 million people in total, and suggested that evangelicals were particularly keen users of Internet media. They found no move away from local churches, however: 'Faith-related activity online is a *supplement* to, rather than a *substitute* for offline religious life.'⁹³ The figure of 64% includes a very wide variety of activities – 38% of Internet users had sent or received emails with spiritual content, but 35% had simply gone online to send e-greetings cards and 32% had read news stories.

Another edited volume appeared the following year: *Religion in Cyberspace*, edited by Morten Højsgaard and Margit Warburg.⁹⁴ The editors present their collection as the start of a "third wave" of research, following the first wave – 'focusing on the fascinating, new, and extraordinary aspects of cyberspace'⁹⁵ – and the second, which had emphasized the diversity of religious Internet use and the importance of social context. The third wave, they hoped, would gather these diverse questions and methodologies into a mature discipline. Chapters pursue a number of well-established issues, including the form and effectiveness of online ritual, new religious movements online, the effects of online activity on authority structures, rhetoric in forums, online identity and virtual community. A valuable emphasis on the offline context of individuals and groups can be discerned through many of the contributions – one characteristic of what the editors refer to as "second wave" scholarship.

Two essays address the key issue of online ritual. Lorne L. Dawson⁹⁶ and Steven D. O'Leary⁹⁷ report that examples were scarce and almost exclusively text-based at the time of their research. 'Whatever the potential of the Net to mediate religious experience,' Dawson claims, 'it is not happening much yet.'⁹⁸ O'Leary argues that 'the web has made very little

⁹² Lynn Clark, Stewart Hoover, and Lee Rainie, "Faith Online," (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2004). <http://www.pewInternet.org/Reports/2004/Faith-Online.aspx>. Accessed 10-01-10

⁹³ Ibid. p ii

⁹⁴ Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (eds.), *Religion and Cyberspace* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005)

⁹⁵ Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, "Introduction: Waves of Research," in *Religion and Cyberspace*, p8

⁹⁶ Lorne L. Dawson, "The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace," in *Religion and Cyberspace*

⁹⁷ Stephen D. O'Leary, "Utopian and Distopian Possibilities of Religion in the New Millenium," in *Religion and Cyberspace*

⁹⁸ Dawson, "The Mediation...", p34

difference to the actual ritual practice of pagans online',⁹⁹ wondering why practitioners had not embraced webcams, images, sound and 3D graphics to increase the sophistication and sensory impact of their practices. Computer games, he suggests, offer a glimpse of what online religion could become with the right designers and resources.¹⁰⁰

For both authors, certain characteristics of the Internet undermine its potential as a ritual medium. Dawson considers the Internet 'ill-suited to the mediation of religious experience... because it is a too exclusively ocular, image-driven, textual, change-oriented, individualistic, detached and disembodied medium.'¹⁰¹ He also argues that the 'dominant culture of cyberspace at present is just too glib and reactive'¹⁰² to support traditional forms of religiosity. If online ritual is to work, participants must show that "radical reflexivity is compatible with genuine religious experience, under a transformed conception of the sacred."¹⁰³ O'Leary also sees reflexivity as a barrier to successful ritual, but emphasises the actual embodied practice of going online: 'I do not believe that any cyber-ritual... will ever be able to replace ritual performance in a physical sacred space... the participant in such ritual remains too much of a spectator, separated from the virtual space by the box on the desk.'¹⁰⁴

These treatments of online religion were published too soon to include any mention of the breakthroughs of 2004, but some of the participants in those experiments have produced useful accounts of their experiences. Mark Howe's MTh thesis, 'Towards a Theology of Virtual Christian Community',¹⁰⁵ is one of the most valuable. Howe had been involved with Church of Fools from the beginning, and his work builds on his familiarity with computer technology, sociological theory and theology to offer detailed accounts of the history and culture of the church and dismiss numerous objections.

⁹⁹ O'Leary, "Utopian...", p39

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p44

¹⁰¹ Dawson, "The Mediation...", p19

¹⁰² Ibid., p.34

¹⁰³ Ibid., p28

¹⁰⁴ O'Leary, "Utopian...", p.44

¹⁰⁵ Mark Howe, "Toward a Theology of Virtual Christian Community" (MTh dissertation, Spurgeon's College, 2005).

Heidi Campbell's monograph *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network*,¹⁰⁶ published 2005, also combines sociological and theological approaches to Christian Internet activity. Campbell studies three email lists, one Anglican, one related to prophecy and one mainly for visually impaired or disabled Christians. Each receives three months of participant observation, a questionnaire and a number of face-to-face interviews in Britain and North America. Each group acts primarily as a supplement to face-to-face churchgoing, and maintains a relational network – a focus which Campbell interprets as one manifestation of the shift in contemporary culture toward loose, dynamic social groupings. Theologically, Campbell examines Christian interpretations of church and community and suggests that the new focus on relationships poses a challenge to traditional Christian ecclesiology. Campbell has written prolifically on issues related to religion and the Internet, and a selection of her other articles will be discussed below; her detailed literature review of the field published in 2006 was a very helpful source for the early section of this chapter.¹⁰⁷

2006: THE INTERNET CAMPUS

The last development in online churchgoing I discuss here is the emergence of the “online campus”. This style of online churchgoing has blossomed in popularity over the last four years and has already transformed the way Christians worship online – and the numbers who do so. The model was first popularised by LifeChurch.tv, a church of 20,000 members based in Oklahoma. LifeChurch.tv operates a “multi-site” system, broadcasting sermons by the senior pastor, Craig Groeschel, to “campuses” in many different neighbourhoods and cities. Each has its own local pastor, worship band and staff, and members are strongly encouraged to join “LifeGroups” for teaching and fellowship. In March 2006 LifeChurch.tv launched the ‘Internet Campus’, broadcasting music and sermons over the Internet. This was nothing new – churches had been using the latest media to broadcast services throughout most of the twentieth century – but a campus-like community was created around those broadcasts through chatrooms, blogs and online small groups. A web pastor was appointed. Visitors could choose a music stream, click on buttons to signal assent to certain statements

¹⁰⁶ Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005)

¹⁰⁷ Campbell, "Religion and the Internet." *Communication Research Trends* 26, no.1 (2006)

and edit online sermon notes before joining a chaotic chatroom for a limited period afterwards. An altar call was always included, and anyone responding was offered a free ‘What’s Next?’ pack including music, sermon CDs and a Bible.

At the time, I wrote a brief unpublished essay that included comments on this system. ‘While this limited interactivity may seem counter-intuitive,’ I wrote, ‘a retrograde step rejecting the potential of the Internet, it is in fact highly effective; the presence of a separate chat window would break the sense of immersion in the environment and so disperse some of the impact of Groeschel’s words. The use of buttons creates a sense of participation without offering space for dissent, creating the impression that great numbers of people are watching with the visitor and agreeing with all Groeschel has to say.’ In fact, this has proven to be one of many examples of the power of the Internet to wrong-foot commentators; features may seem crucial one moment and vanish the next. The Internet Campus now does offer a chatroom, kept open alongside the broadcast at all times and manned by volunteers who also operate one-to-one “live prayer” chat software. My initial comments were not unfounded, however; the chatroom does offer a space for distraction and dissent, and can become a highly contested area.

Imitators were quick to follow. Afterlife.tv¹⁰⁸ applies a similar model to extend the work of a church in Colorado, as do Flamingo Road¹⁰⁹ in Florida and Central Christian¹¹⁰ in Las Vegas – which offers both an online campus and a Facebook campus, where visitors can interact with one another through that social network site while viewing broadcasts. The Leadership Network counted 44 other examples, making 48 in total as of November 2009.¹¹¹

These online campuses display two particularly important features, made possible by the combination of broadcast content and dedicated staff. First, they seek to leverage the

¹⁰⁸ ‘Afterlife.tv’, <http://www.afterlife.tv/>. Accessed 16-03-07

¹⁰⁹ ‘Flamingo Road Church’, <http://www.frclive.tv/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

¹¹⁰ ‘Central Christian Church’, <http://www.centralonlinecampus.com/> and <http://www.mediasocial.tv/Central/facebook.aspx>. Accessed 10-01-10.

¹¹¹ Leadership Network, ‘Churches with an Internet Campus’, <http://digital.leadnet.org/2007/10/churches-with-a.html>. First posted 31-10-2007, last updated 22-11-09.

social capital of individual visitors to spread their message and influence. Talented media teams design trailers, banners and short videos for visitors to post to their own blogs and networks, while social network sites like Facebook allow these churches to connect with members again and again to reinforce key messages. Second, these online campuses can attract truly vast audiences: unlike a chatroom ritual or virtual world church service, a broadcast can be viewed by any number of people. LifeChurch.tv claims to attract thousands to its services every week, and Craig Groeschel has boasted of future congregations in the millions.

2006-PRESENT DAY: HIGHLIGHTS FROM A FLOURISHING

FIELD

The study of online religion has blossomed in the latter half of this decade, responding in part to the proliferation of new kinds of online activity. New digital media emerged, most notably the rise of blogging, the success of collaborative projects like Wikipedia and content-sharing sites like YouTube, the explosion of social networking and the more recent flourishing of microblogging sites like Twitter. Some of these forms developed pre-existing models – a blog, for example, is essentially a regularly updated homepage with certain options for feedback from visitors – but new easy-to-use software, free hosting services and intensive media coverage helped secure mainstream awareness. The collective term “Web 2.0” refers to certain shared features of these new developments. Interactivity, personalisation and user-generated content are particularly important themes, part of a shift from static websites offering one-way communication to more interactive, customizable, networked online spaces.

Responding to this new trend, Time Magazine awarded Person of the Year for 2006 to “You”.¹¹² “It’s a story about community and collaboration”, declared the lead article, “on a scale never seen before. It’s about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the

¹¹² Lev Grossman, “Time’s Person of the Year: You,” *TIME*, 13-12 2006.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html>. Accessed 10-01-10.

million-channel people's network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes." Seeing the world in terms of catchphrases can be dangerous, of course, encouraging a sense of determinism and ignoring more complex dynamics, particularly the significance of context; the following year, the final page of the Person of the Year issue sarcastically suggested awarding that title to "Them".¹¹³ Corporations, mainstream news media, politicians and celebrities had all discovered how to use new media to reinforce their status and control.

One interesting study of Church of Fools appeared in 2006. Ally Ostrowski's "Cyber Communion" is based on a small survey, gleaned 34 responses from a sample of 500 registered members. Two thirds of respondents had first visited the church out of curiosity, but most mentioned communication, prayer, evangelism and diversity as reasons to return. "I met such a diverse and fascinating range of people", one wrote, "with such interesting views – where else in real life would I have met Muslims, Jews, Atheists, Agnostics, and every Christian denomination under one roof all eager to explore and challenge each other openly and without inhibition?"¹¹⁴ Another referred to the church as "a portable sacred space".¹¹⁵ Only a small proportion saw the church as fulfilling all their spiritual needs, however – 12.5%, or 4 people – and some comments were negative. "It's just a shame", said one, "that church of fools replicates all that is bad about a "church" – an old unadaptable building, worship led by one person from the front and no interactivity... as a result, it feels a bit like a gimmick."¹¹⁶

Other researchers started to undertake valuable comparative work investigating a much wider range of religious and geographical contexts. The new global scope of the field was demonstrated by a special issue of the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication in 2007, "Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Religion and Computer-Mediated Communication".

¹¹³ James Poniewozik, "The Year of Them," *TIME*, 19-12 2007.
http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1690753_1695417_1695397,00.html. Accessed 10-01-10

¹¹⁴ Ally Ostrowski, "Cyber Communion: Finding God in the Little Box," *Journal of Religion and Society* 8(2006). p10

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* p12

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* p11

Ten contributions discussed “The Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as Hinduism, Shinto, Taoism, Chinese traditions, animism, Japan's New Religions, and diverse forms of Buddhism ... Israel, Egypt and the Arab world more broadly, India, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States.”¹¹⁷ Mitsuharu Watanabe examined an online community that combined forums and blogs, the same media cluster offered by St Pixels, and reported that the mixing of monologues and dialogues created options for flexible strategies of self-presentation and conflict avoidance.¹¹⁸ Heidi Campbell interviewed a series of Christian, Jewish and Muslim Internet users and compared their views of authority, demonstrating some of the different ways in which different communities understood the Internet and framed it as an acceptable medium for religious activity.¹¹⁹

Stephen Jacobs compared the design of sacred space and ritual in an online Hindu Temple and Virtual Church.¹²⁰ The pastor/designer ‘wanted "in some sense to replicate what we were doing in the physical living church"’, including images of church rooms. According to Jacobs, ‘The act of signing in signifies a threshold ... It connotes a crossing over into a designated zone of religious activity.’ Interviews with members suggested that ‘the Virtual Church functions as a sanctuary from the trials and tribulations of the profane world’, as a supplement to local churchgoing. For Jacobs, ‘The virtual is primarily conceived by the designers of both of these sites in terms of simulation—a false approximation of the real. This consequently places a limitation on the ways in which the potentiality of cyber-environments has been exploited.’

The increasing richness and diversity of the study of online religion has been showcased in a variety of other special issues, but I will concentrate here on a particularly

¹¹⁷ Charles Ess, Akira Kawabata, and Hiroyuki Kurosaki, "Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Religion and Computer-Mediated Communication," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3 (2007). <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/ess.html>

¹¹⁸ Mitsuharu M. Watanabe, "Conflict and Intolerance in a Web Community: Effects of a System Integrating Dialogues and Monologues," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3 (2007). <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/watanabe.html>

¹¹⁹ Heidi Campbell, "Who's Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3 (2007). <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/campbell.html>

¹²⁰ Stephen Jacobs, "Virtually Sacred: The Performance of Asynchronous Cyber-Rituals in Online Spaces," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3 (2007). <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/jacobs.html>

important dedicated journal. "Online", the Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, was established in 2005 as part of a project run by 8 members of Heidelberg University's Ritual Dynamics Center and has published three online editions to date with a fourth to follow in 2010. The parent project, "Between Online-Religion and Religion Online: Forms of Ritual Transfer on the Internet",¹²¹ focuses on online rituals and discourses about rituals in Wicca, Solitaire witchcraft and Christianity and emphasises individual innovation, diversity and ritual change.

In the first issue, in 2005, Helland returned again to his concepts of "online religion" and "religion online". According to "Online Religion as Lived Religion",¹²² the preceding 5 years had seen considerable development beyond the once-sharp distinction. The two concepts are now best understood as points on a continuum, and particular attention must be given to user perceptions. The main thrust of the typology remains, however: groups engaged with online religion represent "a networked form of religious interaction and participation, which is significantly different from groups that are using the medium to support their hierarchical "top-down" world-view".¹²³ Computer communication has an in-built bias: "Hierarchies and networks are two very different systems and the Internet was really only designed for one of them."¹²⁴

Heidi Campbell's contribution, "Spiritualising the Internet",¹²⁵ examines ways in which users seek to conceptualize the Internet as suitable for religious use. Technologies are "cultured" by users, reshaped through practice and rhetoric to fit into the boundaries and beliefs of particular cultures. Campbell distinguishes four discourse strategies, framing the Internet as a spiritual medium facilitating religious experience, a sacramental space set aside for the holy, a tool to be used for religious purposes or a technology supporting religious life and practices. i-church, the Anglican project of the Diocese of Oxford, is offered as an

¹²¹ Gregor Ahn, "Sub-Projects: Between Online-Religion and Religion Online: Forms of Ritual Transfer on the Internet", http://www.ritualdynamik.uni-hd.de/en/en_teilprojekte.htm#C2target. Accessed 10-01-10.

¹²² Christopher Helland, "Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 01, no. 1 (2005).

¹²³ *Ibid.* p4

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* p13

¹²⁵ Heidi Campbell, "Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 01, no. 1 (2005).

example of this last option; according to Campbell, the parish-like structure and use of traditional liturgical prayers show that i-church is supporting a particular religious identity.¹²⁶

The 2006 issue focused on ritual. According to Cheryl Casey's "Virtual Ritual, Real Faith",¹²⁷ all ritual is virtual because it points to something beyond itself. Cyberspace is therefore "a uniquely appropriate medium" for ritual enactment.¹²⁸ Discussing St John's Internet Church, Casey describes the creation of sacred space through links and images and the use of online text Eucharist services. Ritual embodies the unseen, a focus easily lost in a physical setting. This approach rejects most treatments of online ritual, such as O'Leary's chapter in *Religion in Cyberspace*, where the lack of physical engagement is considered to diminish immersion. Casey bases her argument on ritual theory, however, without engaging with theology or with actual users, and it is far from clear than any particular religious tradition or group really thinks about their religious practice in the way she describes.

The third issue of "Online" in 2008 included 13 articles – almost a double issue – on "virtual worlds". No fewer than 5 refer to virtual churches, with 2 discussing Church of Fools, 2 Second Life and one comparing both. Kerstin Radde-Antweiler mentions two Christian churches and several Christian groups in an overview of the presence of different religious "clusters" in Second Life, emphasising the importance of focusing on the individual user to generate "actor related religious historiography".¹²⁹ The other four articles deal with online churches in much more detail, and require fuller treatment here.

Andréé Robinson-Neal offers reflections on her own experiences as a churchgoer at ALM ("Abundant Living Ministries") CyberChurch, supported by a poll of a handful of online friends.¹³⁰ Her allegiance to ALM is based on familiarity and trust – "the experience is

¹²⁶ Ibid. p19

¹²⁷ Cheryl Casey, "Virtual Ritual, Real Faith: The Revirtualization of Religious Ritual in Cyberspace," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 02, no. 1 (2006).

¹²⁸ Ibid. p76

¹²⁹ Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, "'Virtual Religion': An Approach to a Religious and Ritual Topography of Second Life," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 03, no. 1 (2008).

¹³⁰ Andréé Robinson-Neal, "Enhancing the Spiritual Relationship: The Impact of Virtual Worship on the Real-World Church Experience.", *Online* 03, no.1 (2008)

only slightly different from worship at my local church” and the worship space looks like a virtual chapel. “Faith in the leadership” was supported by several factors including ordained ministers, a well-defined belief statement, financial reports and good mechanisms for spiritual support.¹³¹ Participation has “enhanced my personal worship experience” by offering “access to additional faith based studies” and connection with a larger community of believers. Joining ALM also affected other in-world activity: “It was as if my avatar had made a move to a more Christian lifestyle.”¹³² Her survey received only 15 full and 22 partially-completed returns, and barely a quarter of those attended worship in-world once per month or more, but such conclusions as can be drawn are presented as somewhat surprising; rather than echoing her own experiences, two-thirds said that participation in virtual church did not “impact real-world worship”¹³³ in any way. For many, she concludes, worship with an avatar is an act of curiosity, a natural extension of the activities they enjoy, and a chance to connect with like-minded others. This is interesting, but it is possible that the questions asked were unclear – to “impact real-world worship” is hardly a synonym for “making a difference to one’s spiritual life”, but seems to be used as such throughout the article.

Three other articles discuss Church of Fools. Simon Jenkins, one of the project leaders, offers an invaluable account of his experiences.¹³⁴ He describes the Ship of Fools website – not a church or a place for worship, because that would require “somewhere that looked and felt like sacred space, and which gave a visible metaphor for people meeting together”¹³⁵ – and the Ark, a brief 3D project. He goes on to discuss the motives behind Church of Fools, community practices and the experiences of leaders and visitors. Jenkins’ article offers a wealth of anecdotes and analysis and is used throughout my Church of Fools chapter.

¹³¹ Ibid. p235-6

¹³² Ibid. p237

¹³³ Ibid. p239

¹³⁴ Simon Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels: Experiments in an Online Church," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 03, no. 1 (2008).

¹³⁵ Ibid. p96

Randy Kluver and Yanli Chen contribute another article on Church of Fools,¹³⁶ based on participant observation, interviews and a survey of blogs and media reports, but their brief research offers far less rich and reliable data. Their article is inaccurate at times and makes very little use of any interviews they conducted. Some discussions are useful, particularly their attention to media coverage and to the characteristic combination of irreverence with sincerity, but they conclude that “the Church of Fools is a curious mélange of levity and gravitas, of sacred within the profane”¹³⁷ – applying fixed ideas of sacred and profane to a space that might more properly encourage critique of the applicability or definition of such categories.

The final article to be discussed here is much stronger. Nadja Miczek compares Church of Fools, ALM and another Second Life church, Koinonia, looking for changes emerging in the transfer of rituals online.¹³⁸ Rituals are dynamic, affected by processes of transformation, invention and exclusion, and by acts of transfer, ritual failure or creativity. The instability of Church of Fools – where connections might be lost at any time – contributed to a greater tolerance of ritual failure than might be expected offline. Certain ritual gestures were transformed, for example by combining hands-high motions to create “Mexican waves”, while the contents of sermons remained stable. Similarly multi-layered patterns are observed at ALM and Koinonia, with very few newly created elements; even the latter, whose leader claims to have created a new and postmodern ritual space, involves no specially-created online practices. ‘On the level of content [all three churches are] trying to copy offline services as good as possible into the virtual world’,¹³⁹ and Miczek suggests a practical motive for this: ‘The continuance of ritual content and a great part of the structure guarantee that the ritual is recognised as a Christian service which visitors can follow’.

2008 and 2009 have seen a number of important events and helpful resources, particularly in the UK. Ailsa Wright, a member of i-church, contributed a chapter to

¹³⁶ Randy Kluver and Yanli Chen, "The Church of Fools: Virtual Ritual and Material Faith," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 03, no. 1 (2008).

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* p137

¹³⁸ Nadja Miczek, "Online Rituals in Virtual Worlds: Christian Online Services Between Dynamics and Stability," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 03, no. 1 (2008).

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* p167

Evaluating Fresh Expressions,¹⁴⁰ offering the kind of informed member's viewpoint that Mark Howe and Simon Jenkins have provided for Church of Fools and St Pixels. Mark Brown, then leader of the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life, produced two reports of his own in April¹⁴¹ and December 2008¹⁴² to describe the community and outline his thoughts about online religion. The Anglican Cathedral connected with dioceses in England and New Zealand to organise a series of strategy meetings and produced a variety of interesting material, including drafts of a new church constitution, a seminar at the 2008 Lambeth Conference, and a brief paper by Paul Fiddes, a well-respected Baptist theologian, arguing for the validity of online communion.¹⁴³ Future studies of this significant topic, sociological or theological, will benefit greatly from his suggestions and the responses they received online. Sacraments also appeared in a special issue of the Epworth Review, 2008; arguing that online church is 'forever incomplete'¹⁴⁴ without communion, Debbie Herring encouraged online churches to find practices within their own cultures that might carry the same significance as the sharing of bread and wine.¹⁴⁵ Finally, the CODEC research centre at Durham University was founded to study Christianity in a digital age. The Centre has shown keen interest in encouraging communication between researchers and interested Christian groups, and their first conference in the summer of 2009 offered a valuable forum for these conversations.¹⁴⁶

2009 saw the publication of a new monograph on the subject of online churches, and this will be the last text discussed here. *SimChurch*¹⁴⁷ was written by Douglas Estes, a New Testament professor and head pastor of Berryessa Valley Church in California. Unlike previous theological texts, Estes' book is based on actual experience of real online groups and practices. His book is aimed at a popular Christian audience and seeks to persuade its readers that online churches are necessary, valuable and theologically valid, and that – since

¹⁴⁰ Ailsa Wright, 'i-church.org: The Unfolding Story of a Fresh Expression of Church <www.i-church.org>', in Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy, eds., *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008)

¹⁴¹ Mark Brown, 'Christian Mission to a Virtual World', April 2008. http://brownblog.info/?page_id=409, Accessed 10-01-10

¹⁴² Mark Brown, 'The Digital Revolution and the Church', December 2008. http://brownblog.info/?page_id=409. Accessed 10-01-10

¹⁴³ Paul Fiddes, 'Sacraments in a Virtual World?', June 2009. <http://brownblog.info/?p=886>. Accessed 10-01-10.

¹⁴⁴ Debbie Herring, "Towards Sacrament in Cyberspace," *Epworth Review* 35, no. 1 (2008). p41

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. p42, p45

¹⁴⁶ 'Christianity in the Digital Space', 13th -15th July 2009. <http://digitalsymp.blogspot.com/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

¹⁴⁷ Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009)

they are inevitable anyway – mainstream churches should engage with them as quickly as possible. Estes promises ‘more measured, less sensational, deeper dialog about the merits and demerits of virtual churches’,¹⁴⁸ but makes plenty of sensational claims of his own: ‘A change is occurring in the Christian church’, he declares, ‘the likes of which has not happened for centuries.’¹⁴⁹ A new kind of congregation has emerged, heralding the breakdown of social barriers and the first global community since the Tower of Babel, all achieved at minimal financial cost.

SimChurch brings online churches to a wide readership and moves the debate forward in some major areas, and – an extra dimension of interest for this study – pays particular attention to Church of Fools, St Pixels, i-church, the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life and LifeChurch.tv, plus another Internet Campus called Flamingo Road. *SimChurch* also perpetuates some serious misunderstandings, however, and perpetrates a few of its own. Some of the most serious derive from a firm conviction that the future of the Internet will be 3D. Virtual worlds like Second Life are not just one niche use of the Internet, but its true potential. This attitude conceptualizes the Internet as a place, which leads to an excessive reliance on church-building as the best and most necessary Christian strategy: ‘It’s possible that if a synthetic world cannot contain a real church, that world is unreachable; the cause of Christ is lost in that world.’¹⁵⁰ The best churches, regardless of numbers of people involved, intensity of relationships formed or innovation in media use, must be those in virtual worlds. Those are the places where churches ‘have prepared for future waves’ of media use.¹⁵¹

Estes’ most striking claim has been widely quoted in media coverage¹⁵²: ‘The Christian church is engaging far less than 1% of the 20 million people who are active in the virtual world. This means the virtual world is by far the largest unreached people group on planet Earth.’¹⁵³ This is disastrous; Internet users cannot be sensibly defined as one “people

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. p12

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. p17

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p38

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p20

¹⁵² Lillian Kwon, "Brick-and-Mortar Pastor Defends Virtual Churches," *Christianity Today*, 28-10 2009. <http://www.christiantoday.co.uk/article/brickandmortar.pastor.defends.virtual.churches/24485.htm>. Accessed 10-01-10

¹⁵³ Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*. p29

group”, nor can their activity online be taken as the sum total of all their spiritual experience and practice. Estes appears at times to consider the Internet as a realm separate from the rest of everyday life. This conceptual separation also underlies his surprising rejection of the scholarly consensus that online activity supplements local church involvement. This is demeaning to online churches, he argues, and the ‘anecdotal’ evidence he has collected proves that only ‘marginal’ virtual churchgoers think this way.¹⁵⁴ For an online church to be a real church, it must be self-reliant and self-contained – a principle that also underlies his enthusiasm for virtual baptism and communion.¹⁵⁵

Other aspects of *SimChurch* are much more helpful. Estes describes his own experiences of online churches and interviews online church leaders. He discusses key issues, including community, authority, leadership, identity, presence, worship, mission and Christian response to “sinful” online behaviour, and demands more engagement in dialogue with “real-world” churches and organisations. He encourages churches to experiment with new and creative ideas without relying so heavily on traditional styles and practices.¹⁵⁶ He includes much theological discussion from a Protestant Free Church perspective, surveying the Bible and church tradition to demonstrate that “virtual churches” are not impossible. One particularly useful aspect of the book is its attention to new developments: *SimChurch* is the only offline publication I have encountered that discusses the rise of Internet campuses like LifeChurch.tv, a crucial new development for online religion.

Estes ends with three suggested future projects. Churches should leverage members’ existing online social networks to reach larger audiences,¹⁵⁷ encourage families to use home projection systems to watch online services together,¹⁵⁸ and combine the strengths of real and virtual worlds, with preachers addressing hundreds of small housegroups and home worship centres through Internet media to create scalable, low-cost church networks throughout specific cities or geographical areas.¹⁵⁹ Conceptually, such suggestions move beyond the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. p40

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. p115-131

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. p108

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. p189-203

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. p205-217

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. p221-226

reliance on the metaphors of place and separate spheres that damage much of Estes' arguments elsewhere in the book. Practically, these are all initiatives that some online churches have already started to experiment with, and they could well represent future directions of online church development.

CONCLUSION: THREE KEY THEMES

This literature review has been arranged chronologically, combining references to the most important academic research and Christian commentary with a historical account of the development of online churches. The speed and scope of change in online media makes a purely thematic approach inadequate, eliding perceptions and arguments that originally referred to quite different kinds of activity. When we engage with O'Leary¹⁶⁰ and Dawson's¹⁶¹ arguments about the potential of online media to support spiritual experience, for example, it is important to remember that their speculations about the immersive power of computer games and the compatibility of online culture with sacred space were researched and written before the launch of Church of Fools – even if their chapters were actually published the following year, in 2005.

The chronological approach I have adopted also has limitations, of course, emphasising temporal context but understating the continuity of the debates that have emerged. Scholars engage not only with current online media but also with the work of earlier writers, and a number of key themes have drawn particular attention. This final section of my literature review will bring out these continuities by indicating three major areas of online church research – ritual, authority, and the relationship between online and offline churchgoing – and highlighting the contribution my own studies will make to these debates.

Online ritual has been a primary focus of scholarly research and Christian commentary since the earliest publications in this field. One key observation has been remarkably consistent: online rituals closely replicate offline forms. Schroeder, Heather and

¹⁶⁰ O'Leary, "Utopian and Distopian...", in *Religion and Cyberspace*

¹⁶¹ Dawson, "The Mediation of Religious Experience..." in *Religion and Cyberspace*

Lee's examination of "E-Church"¹⁶² discusses a small congregation meeting in an early virtual world, finding that their activity reproduced many of the standard elements of charismatic worship. This adherence to the familiar has been reported by numerous subsequent studies, appearing in website design¹⁶³ and the architecture and liturgies adopted by churches in virtual worlds.¹⁶⁴ Estes has argued that this reflects only the "beta phase" of online churchmanship, a cautious exploratory stage that will soon be surpassed by attempts to take fuller advantage of the unique potentials of online media,¹⁶⁵ but the longevity of this reliance on the familiar among online churches suggests there may be positive benefits to the strategy that have not yet been recognised.

A second key theme of academic discussion since the 1990s has been the maintenance, transformation or decline of religious authority through online media. Much early study claimed that the Internet was unsuited to hierarchical systems, favouring a shift toward grassroots communication networks that might facilitate the rise of new, heterodox religious ideas and practices. This argument appears most influentially in Helland's typology of "religion online" and "online religion", which distinguishes institution-controlled one-to-many communication from grassroots community-building:¹⁶⁶ 'hierarchies and networks are two very different systems and the Internet was really only designed for one of them'.¹⁶⁷ Campbell has challenged this assumption by demonstrating the power of religious institutions and communities to shape the Internet and promote particular patterns of usage,¹⁶⁸ but Helland also overstates the opposition between hierarchy and network. A wide variety of religious institutions now sponsor their own online communities, combining hierarchy and network in ways that Helland's typology cannot readily accommodate.

Finally, a number of studies have discussed the relationship between online and offline churchgoing. The Barna Group's well-known early report, 'The Cyberchurch is Coming',¹⁶⁹ prophesied a mass exodus from the pews to the Internet. Subsequent, much more rigorous surveys by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that online religious

¹⁶² Schroeder, Heather and Lee, "The Sacred and the Virtual..." (1998)

¹⁶³ Jacobs, "Virtually Sacred..." (2007)

¹⁶⁴ Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels...", Robinson-Neal, "Enhancing the Spiritual Relationship...", Miczek, "Online Rituals..." (all 2008)

¹⁶⁵ Estes, *SimChurch*, p108

¹⁶⁶ Helland, "Online-Religion/Religion-Online" (2000)

¹⁶⁷ Helland, "Online Religion as Lived Religion" (2005)

¹⁶⁸ Campbell, "Spiritualising the Internet..." (2005), "Who's Got the Power?..." (2007)

¹⁶⁹ Barna, "The Cyberchurch is Coming," (1998)

activity operated as a supplement rather than a substitute to local engagement,¹⁷⁰ a claim supported by Campbell's qualitative studies of Christian email groups.¹⁷¹ Researchers also found online congregations and ritual practices to be relatively rare,¹⁷² considerably less common than early commentators expected. Discussions of online churches have not recognised this common theme, however, and Christian supporters and critics continue to argue that large-scale moves away from local congregations are likely to occur in the near future. Estes, for example, sees online churches as a key part of attempts to proselytise online and dismisses those who combine online and local churchgoing as 'marginal' to their online congregations.¹⁷³ It is certainly plausible that online churches might be a special case, attracting exclusive commitment in a way that other online religious activities – blogs, forums, social network site pages – do not. This would be in keeping with traditional understandings of church membership, and as a relatively niche activity online congregations could have been overlooked in the general surveys and studies referenced above, but empirical, up-to-date evidence is scarce.

This brief thematic review has focused on three key issues: online ritual, authority, and the relationship between online and everyday religious activity. Published studies of all three topics have relied on speculation, brief observations and small numbers of interviews – with the exception of the large-scale Barna and Pew surveys, which do not address the specific case of online churches. My chronological review of the field demonstrated the rise of numerous new and larger forms of online church in the last half-decade, offering an opportunity to replace these relatively small, unfocused and potentially outdated studies with rich, detailed, up-to-date observation and analysis. The case studies reported in this thesis represent the first long-term, ethnographic studies of online churches, demonstrating the diversity of the field by reporting recent developments in forums, chatrooms, virtual worlds and video. In each case, the three research themes I have highlighted remain significant: ritual plays a major role in community life, religious authority figures are both upheld and undermined, and complex relationships are established between an individual's online and local religious activities. There are certain common trends, but also considerable diversity between and within each online congregation. Recording these new contexts of online activity in ethnographic detail offers a valuable archive of material for future scholars of

¹⁷⁰ Clark, Hoover and Rainie, "Faith Online," (2004)

¹⁷¹ Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online...* (2005), p161

¹⁷² Bedell, "Dispatches from the Electronic Frontier" (2000)

¹⁷³ Estes, *SimChurch* (2009), p40

online religion, five case studies against which to compare future developments, while my comparative analysis – explained in more detail in the next chapter – draws on my interview and observation data to offer new empirically-grounded insights for these key debates in the study of online religion.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis makes no attempt to define “church” or “community”, accepting those terms wherever practitioners apply them. This decision focuses attention on another level of analysis: the kinds of self-proclaimed “churches” and “communities” that are emerging online. I leave it to theologians and social commentators to decide whether the kinds of groups I describe really merit those titles.

SELECTING CASE STUDIES

Discussion of online religion has focused on certain key questions, particularly regarding identity, community, authenticity, authority and ritual in online environments. We can only hope to make progress toward answering these questions if we build a firm and rich understanding of what is actually taking place online, and that requires detailed, long-term, comparative study of online churches and their congregations.

My Masters research began this process by starting to analyse Church of Fools, a community I had joined the previous year. I looked around for a suitable comparative study and discovered i-church. These two groups were launched at the same time, from similar theological backgrounds, and used similar media, but they contrasted strikingly in their relationships with other Christian organisations. My doctoral research continued to study these two groups and added two more examples over the first year. LifeChurch launched in 2006 and offered a very different kind of worship and community; this seemed too important a development to ignore. I ignored Second Life at first, feeling that the intense media coverage at that time overstated its importance and appeal, but was eventually persuaded to begin research there when the leader of the Anglican Cathedral contacted the Association of Internet Researchers mailing list to request a community historian. I was initially underwhelmed by some aspects of the Second Life environment – it seemed hard to use, too

complex for my computer, too focused on purchase and display, too unattractive – but the religious vitality of that space, and the contrasts it offered with my research elsewhere, were undeniable. My first case study chapter was the last selected, and only came into focus when I began to write: I had such a wealth of information from my study of the Church of Fools-St Pixels community that I divided that material into two chapters, the first focusing just on the 3D project launched in 2004.

This gradual adjustment of focus was an appropriate response to a field that has changed so rapidly in recent years, seeking to take into account the most significant developments to occur during the research period. The overall result offers three major strengths. The five churches studied here are arguably the five most important now in existence: they have attracted the most media attention, the largest number of published studies, and some of the largest congregations.¹⁷⁴ Studying these five churches offers opportunities to see the potential of online church, what kind of online activities and practices and cultures attract committed participants, and to engage with the work of other researchers. This range of churches also utilises a very wide range of new media: websites, forums, chatrooms, blogs, microblogging, video streaming, virtual worlds and social network sites all feature. Comparative study of quite different forms of communication, presence, design and ritual can be undertaken. Finally, each reflects a different structure of authority and communication between congregation, leadership and the wider church, so I have been able to examine and contrast some quite different understandings of hierarchy, freedom and control.

DEVELOPING A METHODOLOGY

Many scholars have demonstrated the value of online ethnography, and my early research was informed particularly by Steven Jones' *Doing Internet Research* (1999),¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ The 3D Church of Fools still exists as a single-user space; the community moved websites several times and eventually became St Pixels.

¹⁷⁵ Steven G. Jones, ed., *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net* (London: Sage Publications, 1999).

Christine Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* (2000)¹⁷⁶ and Annette Markham's *Life Online* (1998).¹⁷⁷ Heidi Campbell's *Exploring Religious Community Online* (2005)¹⁷⁸ offered a useful example of a case study similar to my own, while Tom Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008)¹⁷⁹ reports an ethnographic study of a virtual world with much useful methodological detail. I did not follow any of these examples completely; every research project is slightly different, and local conditions and constraints demand a flexible response. My own methodology developed gradually as I looked for the most appropriate tools and strategies to gain rich, contextual understanding of the five churches.

This dynamic approach draws on the idea of multi-sited ethnography, a form of qualitative research devised to study cultural formations that are not bounded by a single field site. Rather than focusing exclusively on specific, restricted areas and applying a common set of pre-determined research methods to each, the researcher constructs the object of study itself by tracing out the relationships between different regions of activity. Relevant areas and connections are discovered by following people, ideas or objects as they circulate through networks.

This form of multi-sited study is not an exact match to my own research, differing somewhat in focus and scope. As described by George Marcus, multi-sited ethnography traces associations and connections among research sites and uses these links to construct aspects of the global systems in which those sites are embedded.¹⁸⁰ My own study examines five specific, largely independent sites in close detail, with only brief indications of how these might fit into wider social trends and patterns (see, for example, my discussion of networked individualism, p278ff). My primary purpose has been to construct sound ethnographic accounts of one particular form of online activity and to propose conceptual frameworks for

¹⁷⁶ Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage Publications, 2000).

¹⁷⁷ Annette N. Markham, *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space* (London: Sage Publications, 1998).

¹⁷⁸ Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005).

¹⁷⁹ Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁸⁰ George E. Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995) p96

their analysis, providing a necessary foundation for more abstract, large-scale theoretical work in future.

The principles of multi-sited ethnography are key to the conduct and analysis of each individual case study, however, particularly the emphasis on flexible methodology and open-ended tracing of connections. I had not initially anticipated attending to Facebook, YouTube or face-to-face meetings, for example, but I quickly discovered that each online church had to be understood as a multi-sited network of communication platforms. Participants might focus their attention on one primary interaction space, such as a church website or virtual world location, but adequate understanding of their commitments and practices required exploration of the multiple, often unofficial connections they were also constructing through a wide range of other digital and electronic media.

Multi-sited ethnography also encourages the researcher to adapt methods to make sense of each new context as it emerges, without expecting equivalent richness, consistency or reliability of data to emerge from every site of study. As Marcus explains, ‘multi-sited ethnographies are invariably the product of knowledge bases of varying intensities and qualities’, and require ‘different practices and opportunities’ for each fieldwork location.¹⁸¹ In my own case studies, I have drawn on face-to-face, chatroom, email and telephone interviews, observations, written materials, published survey data and other sources as appropriate for each setting. This flexibility requires careful attention to the strengths and weaknesses of each source, particularly when engaging in comparative analysis, but adopting a single consistent approach to each study site would fail to recognise the distinctive challenges and opportunities offered by each medium, platform and social group.

My research design also draws on the principles of grounded theory, which emphasises the reliance of theory on data through an iterative process conducted throughout the research project.¹⁸² As each case study progressed, I reviewed my notes and transcripts,

¹⁸¹ George E. Marcus, ‘Ethnography in/of the World System’, p100

¹⁸² Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Hawthorne: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967)

coding by hand where appropriate, and identified the major themes of group practice and culture that I considered most important. These themes then shaped the next stages of my research, guiding the next set of interview questions to ask, the most suitable individuals to approach, and the most important areas of group activity on which to focus. This approach emphasises context and respects diversity and change, allowing the most relevant topics to emerge through my research rather than imposing pre-determined categories drawn from earlier literature in relevant fields. I discuss this analytical approach in more detail below, under “Analysis and Writing”.

My Masters research was an exercise in contextual theology. I recognised the importance of experience and evidence and sought to ground my theological ideas in actual practice and discourse, particularly regarding worship and sacraments. I relied on my own personal experiences and sought to become as integral a member of each community as possible. I attended several face-to-face meetings, central parts of the culture of Church of Fools when I joined, and took notes on some lightly-structured interviews with the people I met there. I also secured permission to quote extensively from forum discussions and emails. The end result was a form of “theological ethnography” – theological reflection, grounded in participant observation and interviewing.

My doctoral thesis originally included theological reflection, but over time this faded into the background and eventually vanished altogether. The sociological material I was able to gather through participation and interviewing proved so rich, detailed and extensive that I felt the full scope of the thesis would be needed to explore it. Having recognised the value of ethnography during my Masters I began to apply a more rigorous and systematic approach, but my methods continued to evolve over time to suit the specific demands or restrictions of each case.

Each project began with an initial period of observation and participation. When I had decided that a particular church would make a good case study, I approached one or more leaders to secure their permission. I then presented my research to the congregation in the most appropriate way I could find, offering a chance for questions and objections. My

participant observation continued from that point until the submission of the thesis, with extensive field notes and attendance where possible at any relevant face-to-face events. I also conducted a series of interviews, speaking to at least 25 members of each group. I spoke with a representative sample of participants, including leaders, core members and individuals with particular viewpoints I wanted to explore, and asked for volunteers so that my own perceptions of who or what mattered most in the community would not be the only factor guiding my data collection.

Over time, I recognised that my methodology was too demanding: daily participation in every community simultaneously could not be sustained. Accordingly, I scaled back my participation, focused on one group at a time, and added an extra stage to the project: a one-month period of focused observation, during which I would attempt to participate in as many events and activities as possible. Even this proved difficult – some of the churches examined in this thesis were meeting for worship many times each day and posting dozens of messages to their forums and blogs – but data from these more focused observations appear in the thesis where helpful. This is one idea I drew from Heidi Campbell’s study, which included six to ten week periods of intensive data collection.¹⁸³

A range of other sources and strategies were adopted as the project progressed, to suit the questions I most wanted to pursue and to take advantage of whatever resources became available. My original methodology included no survey work, expecting ethnography to provide richer information and permit a more flexible approach. If I spent time learning the cultures of particular groups and forming relationships, I would be able to gain a much better appreciation of what really mattered in those communities and adjust my questions accordingly. The time commitment required to create, distribute and analyse a survey seemed disproportionate to the limited rewards. Additional problems would have arisen from the small population size at the time my research began and the difficulty of achieving a representative response. In fact, however, four of my five case studies have included data from surveys – because each church surveyed their membership independently of my research. I was invited to assist with analysis and presentation of data from the 2008 St Pixels

¹⁸³ Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*. p77

survey, but was otherwise uninvolved. Other unexpected but useful information has been gathered from reports published by participants, and my case study of i-church benefited greatly from research conducted by one church member and shared with me in 2009. Ailsa Wright had asked a number of members to write accounts of their online activity, and (with their permission) kindly sent me that archive.

One possibility I did not explore was the creation of a research blog. Other researchers have found this helpful, but I felt such work would accomplish little for my project and risk some distortion of group discussion patterns. Katherine Moody has discussed the benefits and drawbacks of her own research blog,¹⁸⁴ highlighting the chance to share her ideas and expose them to feedback, but her study of bloggers is well suited to this kind of open conversation. In my own case, I was unsure of the influence that I might exert by encouraging members of four distinct communities to congregate in one location; I preferred to study each separately, encouraging conversation within those groups rather than creating new artificial settings outside them. Research blogging was also ill-suited to my particular research questions and temperament; I preferred to conduct my ethnographies quietly over time, drawing firm conclusions only at the end of the project rather than committing to regular pronouncements, and felt more profitable discussions could be conducted informally.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

My approach to participant observation involved a sustained attempt to become part of the life of each community. I posted to forum discussions, spent time in chatrooms, attended worship and joined small groups. I hoped to experience church culture for myself, and to let this personal experience guide at least some of my reflections. This personal involvement proved extremely helpful on at least three levels. First, I gained direct experience of some of the strengths and weaknesses of these churches – I could feel for myself something of the power of online worship, the intimacy of online prayer, the warmth

¹⁸⁴ Katharine Moody, 'Researching Theo(b)logy: Emerging Christian Communities and the Internet' in Christopher Deacy and Elisabeth Arweck (eds.), *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p246

of online friendship, and the practices used to engage with or silence disagreement. Second, involvement helped build up familiarity and trust, and this rapport encouraged group members to share their experiences with me. Third, my long-term participation encouraged certain leaders to involve me in policy discussions, offering a clearer perspective on how leadership worked and why decisions were made.

I was able to become an “ordinary member” of these groups only because of the reasonably close match between myself and the membership demographics of the groups I chose to study. There was nothing unusual about an English male churchgoer in his mid-20s joining any of these groups, although most members tended to be older. I was able to engage group members in theological discussions, relying on my (generally broad and High Church) Anglican experiences and ideas to take a full part in services and debates. This whole approach would have required heavy adjustment if I had sought to study groups more distant from my own experience.

This high involvement also brought limitations. Taking part in community activities allowed me to form my own judgements of group culture and practice, but I could not assume that this personal view would be shared by others. I have tried to avoid too much reliance on my own experiences in my writing, referring to interview transcripts and field notes where possible to demonstrate the internal diversity of each community. Taking part in community life also embroiled me in some serious internal conflicts, particularly when I was elected to the Council of i-church; I gained additional insight into the decision-making process, but was viewed as part of a suspect group by some of those who disapproved of Council policies. That particular story is related in the i-church case study; I introduce it here only to demonstrate that becoming part of a community is seldom a simple process, and that any position the researcher establishes within a group is likely to cut off some avenues of experience and conversation.

INTERVIEWING: ONLINE, TELEPHONE, FACE TO FACE

My interviews were conducted through a variety of media. The first took place face-to-face at St Pixels meets, but I soon wanted to talk to members I could not encounter so easily. No part of the online church space could be appropriated as an interview room. Leaders I spoke with balked at creating a secure passworded area of the chatroom and pointed out that all conversations were automatically recorded. I decided to experiment with telephone interviews instead and advertised for volunteers on my church blog. Community members who knew me well vouched for me in comments to my posts, expressed interest in taking part, and in some cases acted on their own initiative to promote the project to others. Volunteers came forward in much higher numbers than expected, and I eventually conducted more than 30 interviews, almost all by telephone. I used the Skype VoIP service to minimise costs and purchased software (Pamela) to record conversations. A small minority wished to participate but declined to be contacted in this way, citing time pressure or privacy concerns, and I spoke to these through an instant messenger program instead. A mix of face-to-face conversations and telephone calls were also used to interview members of i-church and LifeChurch.tv, but some members of both churches insisted on email, citing limited time or a desire to reflect at length on my questions.

A different approach was taken for the Second Life Cathedral. Visitors communicated through text in-world, and I decided to conduct my own interviews through the same medium for four reasons. First, I observed a much higher degree of boundedness in Second Life, a stronger sense that this was a separate world with its own rules and norms. Users construct avatars that may not resemble their physical bodies, and insistence on a telephone call would break that power of disguise. Insisting on out-of-world contact would greatly limit the number and diversity of people I could speak to. Second, I wanted to include discussion of Second Life in my interviews, asking for tours of private houses and favourite places, so remaining in-world made sense. Third, I was conscious of the message that out-of-world contact would send: insisting on phone calls rather than in-world text could only indicate that I did not trust the virtual world as a medium for communication. Finally, I could be sure that all the members I spoke to were comfortable expressing themselves through typed chat, because that was their normal mode of interaction in-world. This was not true of any of the other churches studied, where members could participate in community life without visiting a chatroom.

Some researchers have conducted interviews online, and their studies proved very helpful. Annette Markham's *Life Online* (1998)¹⁸⁵ offers a highly reflexive account of her investigation of a MOO, an early kind of text-based virtual world, including descriptions of her attempts to make contacts, explore the space, arrange interviews by email and conduct them in a chatroom. Some of her suggestions were helpful to my own attempts to interview by email and chat, although – due in part no doubt to the development of technology and online culture over the ten years since her monograph was published – I usually found my own instinct to be the best guide.

Not all studies of online religion have accepted the value of online interviewing. Heidi Campbell selected a small number of group members in the UK and North America and visited them in person, staying in their homes, observing their Internet use, talking to their families and visiting their local church. Her intent, she explains, was 'not only to verify data collected online about members, but also to observe more fully how the internet shaped their engagement with their offline community and local church.'¹⁸⁶ I rejected this strategy for some of the reasons expressed above – it severely curtails the number and diversity of members who can be approached and suggests distrust of online communication – but also because the value of the additional data collected did not seem likely to merit such investment of time and resources. My primary focus was the online group and its culture, and while local involvement and the gap between local and online personae might prove very important to understanding online activity I felt confident that such information could be adequately gleaned from online and telephone conversations. I trusted the people I spoke with to tell me the truth; not the whole truth, perhaps, but at least a large and informative part of it.

This is a strategy that requires some additional comment, because not all researchers have approached the issue of trust in quite the same way. Campbell represents one extreme, insisting on face-to-face conversations with users, family and friends. The opposite extreme can also be found, particularly in writings on Second Life: insistence that "actual" realities

¹⁸⁵ Markham, *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*.

¹⁸⁶ Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*. p78

should not be sought out and need not be known. Wagner James Au, for example, avoids “real life” details about interviewees in his own writings about the virtual world. This protection of boundaries preserves the integrity of the world as a space with its own culture, important in its own right. Any conversations about “real life” should be taken as role-play and used to understand the in-world persona of the speaker.¹⁸⁷ Tom Boellstorff also accepts in-world activity and conversation as ‘legitimate data about culture in a virtual world’:

if during my research I was talking to a woman, I was not concerned to determine if she was “really” a man in the actual world, or even if two different people were taking turns controlling “her”. Most Second Life residents meeting this woman would not know the answers to such questions, so for my ethnographic purposes it was important that I not know either.¹⁸⁸

My own research project echoes aspects of both extremes. As Au and Boellstorff point out, online events and conversations that involve pseudonymity, role-play or the concealing of offline identities can give much insight into online culture if interpreted sensitively. Insisting on offline “verification” would be both pointless and unhelpful, and could violate the carefully-negotiated balance of privacy and self-disclosure cultivated by participants. On the other hand, this research did require interest in “real life”. As Campbell understood, online religion must not be perceived in isolation from local and physical activities, experiences and relationships. We can only understand what takes place online if we understand the local context of participants; indeed, online churches integrate discussion of local life into their everyday online activity.

Fortunately, this potential impasse caused little real difficulty for my research. Each church placed a high value on honest communication, understood in a particular cultural context of acceptable and unacceptable forms of role-play and anonymity. If that context was properly understood, interviewees could be relied on to tell me the truth, or at least to tell me

¹⁸⁷ Wagner James Au, "Taking New World Notes: An Embedded Journalist's Rough Guide to Reporting from inside the Internet's Next Evolution," *First Monday* Special Issue 5 (2006).

¹⁸⁸ Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*. p61

that they would rather not; indeed, I was sometimes surprised by the eagerness of interviewees to volunteer information about their alts, gender play and role-play and the practices they used to defend their privacy. Certain individuals did visit some of the groups hoping to role-play or play-act, but these were easy to spot, rarely became regular visitors and could at least sometimes be encouraged into sincere and heartfelt conversation. Actual intentional deception was rare and caused very great disruption and distress on the very few occasions I witnessed it. I certainly did not find my online interviews unreliable, and those interviewees I was able to meet face-to-face at local gatherings were largely as they had described themselves online.

My use of so many different interview media might seem to undermine the comparative dimension of the study. If I communicate with one group face-to-face and another by email I might receive different kinds of answers, or different levels of intimacy and detail. In fact, this did not prove to be the case. There were noticeable differences in interview style and technique between the media used, but these did not affect the quality of data gathered. On the telephone, for example, it is very difficult to signal politely that an answer is too long or has drifted from the point. Typed text conversations took more than twice as long, often lasting for several hours, and answers tended to be very brief. I did not notice any difference regarding the kinds of topics discussed, however, or the questions people were willing to answer, and the benefits gained from using media appropriate for a particular online group and interviewee far outweighed any challenges.

The only medium I tried to avoid was email. Email conversations proved by far the most time-consuming, slow and uninformative; writing a careful email can take as long as a phone call, and a response may not arrive for weeks. Most attempts at email interviews tailed off unfinished. Emails to busy church leaders rarely received a response unless I was already engaged in regular communication with the person I was emailing and had established some kind of rapport; I had to visit the i-church Trustees and LifeChurch pastor team in person for really useful conversation. Even email exchanges could be useful, however, and some very helpful accounts were collected.

A number of key factors helped these differently-mediated interviews succeed in gathering useful data. I tried to ensure that I spoke with interviewees only through media with which they were comfortable, so they would feel able to express themselves clearly and at length. Interviewees were generally well-educated, and able to speak fluently and insightfully about their experiences. They were generally enthusiastic about their online church activities, considered them important and were pleased to see research undertaken, and so were happy to speak to me about what they were doing and why. I spent time participating in each group, partly to build trust and rapport, and this also encouraged group members to talk to me openly. Finally, the kinds of questions I asked were rarely considered sensitive. All these factors meant that delicate negotiation was seldom needed to elucidate heartfelt, detailed responses. I did not need to rely on body language to inform my interpretation, or to use my own body language and non-verbal communication to encourage and guide the conversation. Had I chosen to study a less enthusiastic and eloquent group of people I might have needed to adopt quite different interview strategies.

ETHICS

My ethical policy was based on case-by-case assessments rather than rigid rules. Three principles were particularly important throughout: context, transparency and audience. I needed to ensure that my methods were appropriate for the group I was studying, that group members knew who I was and what I was doing, and that I asked for permission wherever necessary for quotes and interviews. Group ideas of “public” and “private” could vary significantly, and each church offered a different range of media that I could use to publicise my work and discuss appropriate methods, so adhering to these three core principles led to slightly different research strategies for each group. Two examples are given here to illustrate the kind of negotiation required.

In St Pixels, every member can write a blog. I used my own to introduce my work, ask advice on method and regularly update readers about my progress. Most of the website is public access, but conversations conducted through my blog made it clear that many regarded

the website as a “private” space and felt they were talking to trusted friends. I therefore promised to ask permission from the author of any post on the site that I wanted to quote; to do otherwise would have caused great distress, not to mention ruining any chance of further support for my research.

My approach to LifeChurch.tv was quite different. LifeChurch services may be attended by hundreds or even thousands of participants who need not log in or in any way disclose their identity, and posts to the chatroom appear alongside the service broadcast for all the congregation to see. I therefore treated chatroom posts as public statements, and quoted them without seeking permission. This an appropriate response to chatroom culture, which tends to be public and impersonal, and there was no other way to proceed – participation is much too fluid to strike up a conversation with each contributor, and there were no user profiles or blogs that could be used to introduce or discuss my research.

Other media were simpler to deal with. I treated all blogs and blog comments as public material available for quotation, except in the case of St Pixels. Website and virtual world design was also treated as public, as were any texts included in those designs. These decisions were based on consideration of audience, including the audience who could actually access the material and the audience the author seemed to have intended. In some cases research design was restricted by posted statements about the kinds of research a website would permit: St Pixels and i-church both adopted such statements some years after my research began, in response to increased interest from students. These statements were based closely on a document produced by the Association of Internet Researchers.¹⁸⁹

I followed standard ethnographic procedure in interviews by giving out an information sheet about my research to each participant and requesting a signed consent form, although most considered this unnecessary and something of a nuisance. The format of the consent form required adjustment. Paper versions could have been signed and returned by post, but this would require unfair and unlikely commitment of time and finance by the

¹⁸⁹ Charles Ess, et al., "Internet Research: Recommendations from the Aoir Ethics Working Committee," (Association of Internet Researchers, 2002). <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>. Accessed 10-01-10.

interviewee. Instead, forms were sent out, signed and returned electronically, usually by email. In Second Life, I distributed forms using “note cards”, small text files that can be exchanged and edited in-world. Consent forms needed to be appropriate to online contexts in which real names were sometimes closely guarded and usernames serve as adequate identification, so they could be completed under a username. Real names could be included, if the respondent chose to do so. Email addresses were requested to help me contact respondents in future if they left the group, but this information was also optional.

Attention to contextual appropriateness ruled out certain kinds of research, and I adopted a conservative attitude in uncertain situations. Several interviewees, for example, operated multiple avatars in Second Life to engage in different activities and communicate with different groups of people. Others designed avatars of a different gender, age or race, or dressed in clothes associated with another religious tradition. These options could all have allowed me to engage with and experience the virtual world differently; I would not have experienced that world as (say) a woman might, but I would at least experience how other users acted toward someone they believed to be female. I decided not to experiment with these options for four reasons. Such behaviour would be controversial in the group and could dissuade some members from talking to me in future; it would compromise my transparency as a researcher and so undermine trust; the data gathered would be peripheral to my research, which did not concentrate on those issues; and I could learn at least as much from conversations with a demographically diverse range of group members. Tom Boellstorff dismisses using an alternative avatar or “alt” as “ethically and methodologically inadequate”,¹⁹⁰ but not all researchers have agreed. Gregory Price Grieve spoke about his research to the 2008 AAR conference and discussed the insights he had gained into in-world subversion and reinforcement of ideas of gender through costumes and alts.¹⁹¹ He once teleported straight from a nightclub to a church, forgetting he was still using a female avatar in Wiccan dress. Participants angrily demanded a change of costume and accused him of being male, and he felt compelled to activate his microphone and operate a voice distorter to dispel their suspicions. As a result, he learned something about the enforcement of gender

¹⁹⁰ Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*. p80

¹⁹¹ Gregory Price Grieve, “Rezzing the Ontological Self: Gender-Bending as Key for Analyzing Subjectification in Second Life” (paper delivered to American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, 2008)

roles in that group – but long-term research there would probably have been fatally compromised.

One final issue must be mentioned: names. I decided to include the real names of all the churches I studied. All five have received much mainstream and Christian media attention, including interviews with leaders and members, photographs of websites and participants, and coverage in newspapers, radio and television. All five are highly distinctive, so anyone with good knowledge of the field would have little trouble identifying them even from anonymised descriptions. I include real first and surnames when quoting a member's published work or someone with a publically-announced position. i-church pastors could not realistically be made anonymous, but their Trustees and Council Members could. In all other cases I used pseudonyms to refer to anyone I quoted and tried not to include information that might identify them. I selected a first name to refer to each interviewee, making no attempt to reflect nationality, ethnicity, class or generation, but preserving gender. Each individual has only one username, even if they appear in more than one chapter or church. This strategy may result in the use of some pseudonyms that are, by coincidence, the real names or usernames of other members of one or another of the churches I have studied; this is unfortunate, but unavoidable.

ANALYSIS AND WRITING

The dynamic, flexible methodology described above draws on multi-sited ethnography and grounded theory to develop strategies and themes to suit the specific characteristics of each research site and case study. This is a valuable approach, giving priority to actual data without imposing pre-selected categories, and helped me to identify many unexpected areas of interest.

I extended this approach to the construction of each case study chapter, writing up my data to focus on the most important issues in the most illuminating way. i-church, for

example, has changed dramatically over time and a chronological approach has been adopted to explore those transformations. In *St Pixels*, a much broader range of different media, practices and field sites are pursued concurrently, so I discuss each region separately and include much more attention to Facebook and face-to-face gatherings. Other chapters are arranged thematically, or structured around detailed discussion of a specific event.

In order to test the reliability of these constructions, I emailed a draft of each chapter to at least four members of that group. I identified members who had diverse experiences of the community, had expressed interest in my research and seemed likely to offer helpful feedback. Respondents were asked to look out for factual errors, omissions and moments where they felt my interpretation to be unfair. Sharing my writing with group members in this way was intended to improve the reliability and thoroughness of my observations and to provide an opportunity to challenge my conclusions, and proved extremely useful. The majority of comment was positive and encouraging, but responses also identified a small number of inaccuracies and took issue with some of my arguments. Where a suggested correction did not match my own observations, I cite and discuss the disagreement in the main text as further insight into group culture, discourse and self-perceptions.

This reliance on context helped capture the distinctive characteristics and culture of each church, but risked undermining the value of my data for comparative analysis. Because each case study was conducted and written up in different ways, interesting points of similarity or divergence were more difficult to recognise. I therefore constructed two conceptual frameworks to help bring the five different accounts into conversation with one another, identifying common themes or categories and tracing the different ways in which those categories were negotiated. Both frameworks emerged from my observations over time through comparisons between case studies and events, in accordance with the key principles of grounded theory.¹⁹²

¹⁹² Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, p55

The first theoretical framework is introduced at the end of the first case study chapter, and identifies seven key themes of church activity: mass appeal, the importance of community, the generation of spiritual experiences, the continuing popularity of local churchgoing among users, reliance on familiar themes in design of architecture and liturgy, challenges of internal control, and the significance of external oversight and funding. This conceptual framework identifies the most important topics that emerged from my interviews and observations, and its purpose is not to explain or analyse these observations but to organise data in a way that facilitates comparative study.

All five case study chapters end with consideration of these seven themes. This section is relatively brief in my first four chapters, but much more detailed in the fifth, a study of LifeChurch.tv's Church Online. This shift in focus reflects the relative cultural similarity of the first four churches and the significant dissimilarity of the fifth, and follows the method of comparative study encouraged by grounded theory. According to Glaser and Strauss, the researcher should maximise differences between groups studied as a way to stimulate new theoretical ideas, testing the framework he or she has created and finding new ways to elaborate and qualify it.¹⁹³ The differences between LifeChurch and the other four case studies did indeed prove particularly helpful for my developing insights into online activity.

I explore these insights in much more detail in the final chapter of this thesis, which introduces a second, more analytical framework designed to explore and make sense of my diverse observations. The initial insight that led to the development of this framework came from my dissatisfaction with much current Christian debate over the value of online churches, which, I realized, was rooted in weak understanding of the diverse kinds of connection that can be maintained between online activity and everyday life. Returning to my data, I found that almost all of my observations and hypotheses could be traced to one of four levels of this relationship between digital and everyday. While the initial insight came from my reflections on published literature, the development of this idea into a theoretical framework was rooted closely in my data, in accordance once again with the principles of grounded theory.

¹⁹³ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, p57

In this final chapter, I argue that online churches copy everyday life, become part of everyday life, remain distinct from everyday life and become distinctively online – supporting each claim with examples from my data, and using each level to engage with current scholarly and Christian debates. All four levels operate simultaneously in both individual and group activity, but each user, leader or designer adjusts their strategies and interaction designs to achieve the particular balance required for each specific engagement. One participant may encourage her online friends to visit her house and meet her family, while another maintains a pseudonym and seeks to conceal her location; each strategy represents a different approach to the relationship between online and everyday, and attention to all four different dimensions of that relationship is needed to construct a nuanced, contextually-sensitive account of their perceptions and practices.

This final analytical framework displays the four characteristics Glaser and Strauss consider necessary for practical application: fitness to data, ease of understanding, general application to a range of fields, and partial control over everyday situations of application.¹⁹⁴ The designer or manager of an online church or ministry can control the degree to which that ministry copies the everyday and explores the unique potentials of online activity, and can to some extent control the opportunities available for users to integrate or separate their online and everyday activity. It is to be hoped that this research will be of value to scholars, practitioners and interested observers.

¹⁹⁴ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, p237

CHAPTER ONE: CHURCH OF FOOLS

There ought to be a church on the net. It's like someone has created a new town and no one has thought to build a church there. It's almost scandalous.

- Simon Jenkins¹⁹⁵

The Church of Fools today is an empty space, a miniature virtual world where the visitor can wander alone and stop for solitary prayer. For four brief months in 2004, however, that small world bustled with activity. Its innovative 3D space offered the chance to meet, converse and worship through avatars, text and music and attracted many thousands of visitors each day, revolutionising a kind of online activity previously offered only by a few low-profile chatrooms and simple websites. Those experiments created small fellowship groups, Bible studies and easy ways to hear from or contact particular preachers. With the Church of Fools, online religion blossomed into the crowds and chaos of a big-tent revival meeting, an anarchic, argumentative sacred space that attracted as many congregants as a cathedral or megachurch. The new church secured a range of high-profile guest speakers to lead its worship and received unprecedented world-wide coverage in mainstream and Christian media; it also attracted almost uncontrollable waves of trouble-makers, whose activities generated yet more media attention. The Church experiment was short-lived, as its designers had intended, but formed a community that remains active as I write today. The core of that community moved from website to website and finally became St Pixels; their story will be told in a later chapter of this thesis.

Church of Fools was the first online church I joined, long before I started considering the possibilities of online research, and I have recorded interviews, notes and conversations since the start of my Masters research in 2005. By that time the Church was a simple text-only website with forums and a chatroom, and its 3D days were a distant but oft-repeated memory. I never saw the first Church of Fools in action, welcoming bishops to worship or

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in Malcolm Doney, "Computer Church," *Church Times*, 14-05 2004. <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=10102>. Accessed 10-01-10

besieged by griefers, but among my interviews I found a wealth of memories, experiences and impressions that deserved to be retold. This chapter is divided into seven sections, discussing the prehistory of the Church, its launch, the use of architecture and space, the avatar, worship, grieving and control, and draws on stories retold in my own interviews, observations from my visits to the now-empty 3D space, and a range of published and unpublished research by some of the original church members.

THE SHIP OF FOOLS AND THE ARK

The story of Church of Fools begins with the Ship, a short-lived print magazine from the 1970s relaunched online in 1998. The Ship of Fools website describes itself as “The Magazine of Christian Unrest”, ‘[i]conoclastic and debunking but also committed to the ultimate value of faith’. According to the ‘editor and designer’, Simon Jenkins, ‘We're here for people who prefer their religion disorganized [...] Our aim is to help Christians be self-critical and honest about the failings of Christianity, as we believe honesty can only strengthen faith.’¹⁹⁶

The central values of the Ship, as expressed in these and other official sources, focus on the pursuit of honest faith through humour and irreverence. Regular articles and features include satirical commentary on parish life and news from major denominations, caption competitions, “Mystery Worshipper” reviews of church services, and humorous special features that frequently attract coverage from mainstream print media.¹⁹⁷

The site also boasts extensive forums.¹⁹⁸ The “Heaven” section is designed for ‘creativity, comedy and random questions’, “Purgatory” for ‘serious debate’ and “Hell” as

¹⁹⁶ ‘Ship Stuff’, <http://www.ship-of-fools.com/shipstuff/index.html>. Accessed 10-01-10.

¹⁹⁷ Martin Beckford, “‘Jesus Saves’ piggy bank revealed”, *Daily Telegraph*, 5-12 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/christmas/3566932/Jesus-Saves-piggy-bank-revealed-in-12-Days-of-Kitschmas-collection.html>. Accessed 27-02-09

¹⁹⁸ ‘Community Boards’, <http://forum.ship-of-fools.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi>. Accessed 10-01-10. Quotes in this paragraph come from introductory texts posted above each forum.

‘the refuge of the irascible, the contentious and the just plain pissed off’. Hell offers a space for disgruntled posters with ‘a complaint, a rant or a personal argument to settle’, and anyone looking for a fight with another site member can summon them to Hell for a blunt and public exchange of views. These forums are strictly moderated to keep postings in the right place and contributions are governed by a set of “Ten Commandments”. Rule One is straightforward: ‘Don’t be a jerk’. These attitudes to conversation and debate would strongly influence the development of Church of Fools: ‘All views are welcome – orthodox, unorthodox, radical or just plain bizarre – so long as you can stand being challenged.’¹⁹⁹

On April 20th, 2003, the Ship launched “The Ark”.²⁰⁰ “The Ark” was a unique virtual environment, designed in Shockwave 3D by the “specialmoves” design firm with funding from Jerusalem Productions and Premier Christian Radio. The project website is still online, offering visitors the chance to enter the environment, watch clips, read news stories and take a guided tour. A total of 13 biblical saints and sinners, from John the Baptist to Jezebel, were installed in Noah’s Ark and animated each day by a team of players around the world. Characters could walk around different areas of the Ark, perform gestures and communicate in typed text, with words appearing in speech bubbles moving upward from that character to disappear at the top of the screen. Each player maintained a homepage and online diary for their character. In keeping with the “reality TV” theme of the endeavour, the audience could vote their least favourite characters to “walk the plank” until only one was left. The winner, after 40 days, was John the Baptist.

The Ark featured a swimming pool and helipad-style “dove pad” on deck, a variety of rooms for sleeping, showering and socialising in the cabin, a mast and crow’s nest, and a storage area below decks with an assortment of animals. Characters were given challenges, including putting on a variety show, a performance of Romeo and Juliet and a soap opera, and struggled to find ways to save the Ark’s one Tyrannosaurus from extinction when it fell ill. Characters were also invited to climb the mast to the “crow’s nest”, where they could communicate directly with God to receive that week’s news and challenges; God’s words, of course, appeared at the top of the screen and moved downward.

¹⁹⁹ ‘Purgatory’, <http://forum.ship-of-fools.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=forum;f=2>. Accessed 10-01-10.

²⁰⁰ ‘The Ark’, <http://ark.saintsimeon.co.uk/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

The Ark also included a weekly Sunday service. This often prompted considerable creativity, making use of the gestures and rooms provided to construct events combining humour, irreverence and some degree of sincere spirituality – in keeping with the ideals of Ship of Fools. In the third week a specially-designed chapel appeared in place of one of the living rooms, but services continued to include elements of creative use of space and action. The Ark website posted a regular diary of events, and the description of the first worship service is worth quoting at length:

After a delayed start due to rowdy Bible characters, Sunday night's divine service including preaching, hair washing and a walk round the ship. [...] As all 11 stood on the circle of the Dove Pad at the far end of the deck, Job prayed for the Ark's as yet unseen animals: "We are called to the sacred task of caring for your creation, including the critters below. May they have life and presence, unlike George W. Bush. Amen." [...] John led an "act of repentance" in the washroom, inviting everyone to wash their hair and sing, "Gonna wash those sins right out of my hair" – but this potentially moving moment left Martha [...] cold: "Touching... but impractical. I have great difficulties with symbolic gestures like this." [...] Still, when it came to the last part of the service – a prayer walk led by Esther – it was Martha who volunteered to pray: "let us learn from each other; let us learn about forgiveness."²⁰¹

Note here the combination of creative moments, ascribing new layers of meaning over available actions, with subversive interventions. The opportunity to playfully rework religious practices, language and concepts was viewed quite differently by different participants in this account, but even those trying to interpret the worship seriously did not act in quite the same way as they might in a face-to-face ritual environment. Martha prays sincerely and she disagrees with signs of frivolity in the sermon, but she also interrupts throughout the event to offer her own commentary.

²⁰¹ 'Day 7', <http://ark.saintsimeon.co.uk/article.php?i=029>

THE CHURCH OF FOOLS

Simon Jenkins published his version of the story of Church of Fools in 2008, in an extremely helpful article for “Online”, the Heidelberg Journal of Religions and the Internet,²⁰² and links the Church of Fools directly back to the experience of the Ark. The two key discoveries made during the “game show”, he claims, were ‘the contestants’ emotional involvement in the game’ and the success of the weekly worship events. The Sunday services offered ‘preaching, Bible readings, prayers and discussion’, and ‘planted an idea in our minds that this might be a way to realise the idea of online church. How would it be if we detached the chapel from The Ark and ran it week by week as a virtual church? What we saw happening in The Ark’s chapel eventually grew into Church of Fools.’²⁰³

Church of Fools was launched just over a year after the Ark, in May 2004, and was also intended as a short-term, high-publicity project. Initially planned to run for three months until August, the project was expanded for one month and eventually closed on September 26th. Well-known speakers were invited to address the congregation once a week, with the first sermon delivered by the Bishop of London. The bishop helped fund the project, but the most important donor was the Methodist Council of Great Britain. No denominational style or restrictions were imposed. These grants sought to create an innovative and experimental virtual environment, in the hope of forming a new kind of church community, but were never intended to support the project on a permanent basis.

Like the Ark, the church environment is still available online for private visits. The illustrations included here indicate something of the graphical style of the church, its architecture and liturgical style and the range of actions possible, and are taken from a “Media Resources” archive made available on the Church of Fools website – an indication of the publicity awareness of the church's managers.²⁰⁴

²⁰² Simon Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels: Experiments in an Online Church," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 03, no. 1 (2008).

²⁰³ Ibid. p98-99

²⁰⁴ 'Media Resources', <http://www.churchoffools.com/media-resources/index.html>. Accessed 10-01-10.

According to Jenkins, the Ship of Fools team identified three specific purposes that they felt a virtual church could fulfil:

1. We wanted to try translating church into the medium of the net. It was to be a genuine experiment, seeking visitor feedback, to find out if online church is a viable way to 'do church'.
2. We wanted to create moments of genuine depth and spirituality, helping people feel they were connecting with God, themselves and others.
3. We wanted to educate and inform people who would never darken the doors of a church about Christian worship and fellowship. We hoped to break down the barriers people have about going to church.²⁰⁵

The Internet Archive has stored a copy of the church website saved on September 24th, 2004, two days before the 3D space closed. A two-paragraph introduction echoes all three of these goals. One statement announces the desire to attract those who do not profess a conventional Christian faith, and reflects the tolerance of "colourful" language in the Ship of Fools: 'The church is partly intended for people on the edges (and beyond) of faith, so please be aware that the language and behaviour in church is often colourful and occasionally offensive.' The introduction also reflects Jenkins' interest in the creation of a true experience of "church": this is 'an attempt to create holy ground on the net, where people can worship, pray and talk about faith'.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels." p100

²⁰⁶ 'Church of Fools', <http://web.archive.org/web/20040924025412/http://churchoffools.com/> . Accessed 10-01-10.

Simon Jenkins has often linked the experimental, missiological work of the Church of Fools with the ecclesiology of John Wesley, founder of Methodism. This connection is strategic, underlining the appropriateness of the decision of the Methodist Council to fund the church, but also expresses something significant about the symbolic importance of establishing church in new settings: ‘Just as the Methodist church leader John Wesley took his preaching out of churches and into the fields and streets in the 18th century, we wanted to take church to where people are in the 21st century – on the Net.’²⁰⁷ Jenkins expressed a very similar idea in 2004 in an interview with the Anglican newspaper *The Church Times*, in which he explains the goals of the church in line with the three-point plan quoted above. Church of Fools does not intend to compete with offline churches, Jenkins insists, but merely to answer an unmet need. ‘An estimated 200,000 people are joining the internet each week worldwide; so we’d better go where the people are. There ought to be a church on the net. It’s like someone has created a new town and no one has thought to build a church there. It’s almost scandalous.’²⁰⁸ By establishing a church online, the church-builders are setting up a presence amid the activity of contemporary life, ‘going where the people are’ and so bringing ‘the people’ into contact with a Christian community. Note the danger here of confusing a space where people spend time – a fair description of the Internet – with the much more problematic conception of “cyberspace” as a separate “world”; Douglas Estes quotes this catchy line about the scandal of a town with no church to support his own hopelessly misguided and misleading claim that the virtual world is ‘the largest unreached people group on planet Earth’.²⁰⁹

Initial media coverage of the Church focused on the evangelistic aspect of the church's vision. Giles Wilson, writing for the BBC, began his article by setting the church firmly into this frame: ‘Churches are having to use their imagination to attract new members. The 3D virtual-reality Church of Fools is just one idea, but does it have any chance of building a congregation?’²¹⁰ The title of his piece - “In cyberspace, can anyone hear you pray?” - highlights the media appeal of the experimental and comical aspects of the “virtual church”. Maria Ortigas, a reporter for CNN, also covered the story from the same angle. Her article,

²⁰⁷ Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels." p100

²⁰⁸ Quoted in Doney, "Computer Church."

²⁰⁹ Estes, *SimChurch*, p29

²¹⁰ Giles Wilson, "In Cyberspace, Can Anyone Hear You Pray?," *BBC News Online Magazine*, 12-05 2004. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/3706897.stm>. Accessed 10-01-10.

entitled "Now God goes online",²¹¹ presents the Church of Fools as a sign of hope for a hopeless cause: 'Leaders of the Christian church in Britain fear an age old message is falling on deaf ears. But a "new means of communication" may just help them reach out and touch someone.' Both Wilson and Ortigas identify the safety of the internet as an advantage over the potentially intimidating experience of walking into a physical building. According to Wilson, 'The thinking is that some people may be more prepared to wander into a website than a church on the corner of the street.' Ortigas quotes a conversation with a churchgoer who expresses a similar idea: 'It's non-threatening. [...] A lot of people don't like to go into a church, because they think it's threatening or they don't deserve to be there.'

According to the Church of Fools' own statistics, the project met with considerable success. As the Reader's Digest put it in August 2004, 'Traditional church-going Christianity might be losing its popularity, but a British-based Internet church is attracting visitors in biblical proportions'.²¹² "Biblical" may be something of an exaggeration, but figures published by the church do seem to indicate that the Church of Fools was attracting more visitors per day than any physical church in Britain at the time; an average of 8000 people visited the site each day in the two weeks after it opened, with a peak of 41,000.²¹³ A survey of 2400 visitors was conducted by the church at the end of the project and Jenkins reports several statistics in his article, including the interesting claim that '39% of visitors were not regular churchgoers (if they went to church at all, they were only there for Christmas, Easter and family occasions)'.²¹⁴ Church of Fools was apparently attracting a large number of people who did not frequently enter a physical church. A visitor from the United States, quoted by Jenkins, supports this claim with an anecdote of their own: 'I have a friend who had a crisis this week. No way would he ever go to a real church. But he went to yours and said his first prayer in many years. You are providing a valuable site for him and others who might never go to a traditional house of worship.'²¹⁵

²¹¹ Maria Ortigas, "Cyber Church: Now God Goes Online," *CNN.com* 12-05 2004. <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/europe/05/12/uk.online.church/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

²¹² 'Divine Online', *Reader's Digest*, August 2004. <http://www.churchoffools.com/media-resources/readers-digest.html?1c>. Accessed 10-01-10.

²¹³ '41000 go to church in a single day', 25-05-2004, http://www.churchoffools.com/news-stories/03_41000.html. Accessed 10-01-10.

²¹⁴ Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels." p113

²¹⁵ *Ibid.* p113

According to Jenkins, 58% of visitors were male and 50% under 30. 48% connected from the US, 27% from the UK and 12% from Continental Europe. One of the leaders of Church of Fools, Mark Howe, wrote an MTh thesis on his experiences – another document I will quote from extensively - and reports these survey statistics from a different perspective: wishing to demonstrate that the typical user was not a young Western male, he emphasises that 50% were over 30 and 32% over 40²¹⁶, and identifies the figure of 89% connecting from the USA or Western Europe as a sign of the remaining global inequalities in the digital world. Unfortunately these two sets of statistics are all that remains and no discussion of methodological weaknesses are provided. In a private communication in 2009, Howe described the project as ‘more of a poll than a survey’, with nothing to prevent people from filling out the form more than once or doing so inaccurately. Indeed, ‘among the responses I ignored in the analysis was a 300 line long piece of ASCII porn clip art.’

ARCHITECTURE AND SPACE IN CHURCH OF FOOLS

The Church of Fools comprised two rooms, a church area and a crypt, connected through a doorway visible on the left in Figure 1. The main church is cross-shaped, with a wide nave and short transepts. The nave contains two rows of five pews either side of a central aisle flanked by translucent columns with rounded, Romanesque arches, leading to a chancel with apse, altar, elevated pulpit and lectern. The doorways into the church and from the church into the Crypt are marked with pointed arches. The stone altar is topped by a golden cross and flanked by two golden candlesticks. The church organ sits to one side. Behind the altar, a stained glass window displays two of the logos of the Ship of Fools website, a cartoon boat being rowed in both directions at once and a bemused-looking image of the magazine's patron, St Simeon the Holy Fool.²¹⁷ A hymn board hangs behind the pulpit, displaying three absurdly high numbers – a gentle subversion of the traditional practice of displaying the hymns to be sung in each service on boards at the front of church. As Figure One shows, the upper walls and roof of the building are missing. The side walls, not quite visible in Figure One, include a set of contemporary images for the Stations of the Cross, each accompanied by a brief, contemplative essay. The Crypt area, accessed through a doorway but marked as underground by a flight of steps in one corner, contains a set of red

²¹⁶ Mark Howe, "Toward a Theology of Virtual Christian Community" (MTh dissertation, Spurgeon's College, 2005). p16

²¹⁷ "St Simeon the Holy Fool", <http://www.shipoffools.com/simeon/index.html>. Accessed 28-02-09

armchairs and sofas, positioned facing each other, and three more armchairs in another corner. Several vending machines line the walls.

The sense of space in the church is augmented by the use of sound. Worship was heralded by bells and accompanied by hymn tunes, but at all times the visitor hears what Jenkins has described as ‘the ambient sound of an echoing church’²¹⁸ - a kind of gentle whispering hush.

The designers considered modern and ancient architectural styles, according to Jenkins, but decided they needed to create something instantly recognisable. ‘Since we wanted to appeal to people who never went to church, we decided that we wanted a church which said “church” as soon as you saw it. Which meant pointed arches, stained glass, pews and other familiar items from historic church architecture.’ Creating traditional forms in a visual style better known for computer games ensured the space retained its novelty: ‘we thought this ecclesiastical style would create atmosphere and give the whole thing a playful, experimental edge.’²¹⁹ This combination of the sincere and the comical is highlighted by the Church Times: “‘At the heart it’s very serious, even though it’s cartoony,” says Mr Jenkins. “I’m sure there’ll be some very funny moments, but we’re playing a fairly straight bat on this.”’²²⁰

²¹⁸ Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels." p103

²¹⁹ Ibid. p101

²²⁰ Doney, "Computer Church."



The Bishop of London blesses congregants in Church of Fools.

Mark Howe's thesis refers several times to the 'Anglican visual metaphor'²²¹ of the Church of Fools, but the architecture of the space cannot be quite so straightforwardly assigned to any one denomination. The pillars and rounded arches indicate a Romanesque style, and the architecture and stonework suggest antiquity. The absence of decoration is a common Protestant or Anglican feature, but the brown-and-white tiled floor and apse are not. The use of Stations of the Cross is unusual among Anglican churches, but can sometimes be found. Those churches which do include Stations very rarely offer contemplative texts. The cruciform shape of the church references traditional architecture, but the exact dimensions of the very brief transepts, low ceiling and very wide nave owe more to the necessities of the virtual space, focusing the church around one large gathering space. There is nothing denomination-specific here; the space is simply marked as "very old" by its pillars, stone and crypt and as "traditional" by its pews and altar. The design of the space is best described, to borrow Jenkins' words, as a collection of 'familiar items from historic church architecture'. It is interesting to note that Howe – a congregational, evangelical Protestant who worked for some time as a missionary in France – perceives this space to be Anglican in style, most likely because the combination of antiquity and bare stonework is most often found in churches converted from Roman Catholicism at the English Reformation. In this instance, decisions in style and design appear to have conveyed unintended meanings to at least some of those visiting the space.

While the altar was never used, its image, particularly the cross it bore, added a symbol of spiritual sincerity. According to Jenkins, 'it was valuable to have the symbol of the cross as a visible sign of what we were doing'. The Stations of the Cross contributed further to this signalling of intent. 'As one of our aims was to help create genuine moments of spirituality in Church of Fools, we decided to enrich the environment' by adding Stations to 'offer an opportunity for individual prayer and reflection.' The Stations offered a chance to include images and text in the environment, and 'they also signalled that we were attempting to create a form of sacred space, even if the overall context of the environment was cartoon-like and had the feel of a computer game.'²²²

²²¹ Howe, "Toward a Theology of Virtual Christian Community". p34

²²² Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels." p101

These explanations indicate a desire to symbolically frame the church space in four different ways: as Christian, church, playful and spiritually sincere. The decision to choose a visual style that emphasises and undermines church-like seriousness at the same time is entirely characteristic of Ship of Fools, one point where the new church is clearly rooted in the culture of the community that founded it.

The desire to frame space as sincere and holy through the use of recognisable church architecture and symbolism met with a positive response from at least some users. Anna, for example, is an American woman who identifies as a High Church Anglican. Anna came to Church of Fools after noticing adverts and discussions of the church launch on the Ship website, where she had been a regular participant for some years. She participated in the 3D church as an ordinary congregant, later taking a leadership role after the closure of the 3D space. I was able to interview Anna in person when she flew from the US to attend a St Pixels gathering in 2008, and again in 2009 after she had married an English member of the community – one extreme example of the close friendships remarked on throughout my interviews with members of Church of Fools and St Pixels. Speaking of the 3D Church of Fools, Anna emphasised the importance of the reality of the space, the feeling that worship and conversation were genuinely taking place in a real church, and suggested that the appearance of the space was one contributing factor to the development of this perception:

I am an observant fairly High Church Anglican, so the fact that it looked like a church and felt like a church mattered to me [...] the church looked churchy, and I don't know about over here so much but we've got some churches over in the States, there's a brand new big one that's pretty rich, and it looks like a posh new fitness centre from the outside, and you think why? But that's not what I think of as church, it's not an auditorium, it's a church. And the 3D environment looked like a church.

THE AVATAR

Visitors to the Church of Fools could be represented as avatars, chosen from a range of pre-designed characters. A special avatar could be created for important guests, like the Bishop of London in Figure Two, to reflect their physical appearance. 12 male and 11 female figures were available for ordinary visitors, all using the same basic body shape. These included a range of skin tones, but only three of each gender were not white. In each case, one avatar was black, one lighter brown and one Asian – as far as can be determined from an image perhaps one inch high. Clothing styles were mostly conservative, with two suits and a range of shirts available for men and trousers, floor-length skirts, trousers and full-sleeved shirts for women; more informal styles were also available, including avatars in T-shirts for either gender. The default male avatar bore a striking resemblance to Ned Flanders, the much-maligned Christian character from “The Simpsons”.

An avatar could be made to walk around the space by clicking on the area of floor to which the user wished to direct it, while clicking on seats caused the avatar to sit. Clicking on the avatar itself brought up a range of gesture options, including four for worship - “kneel down”, “bless”, “Hallelujah!”, and “cross self” - and nine for social interaction – “clap”, “hands on hips”, “laugh”, “point”, “pull hair out”, “shrug”, “scratch head”, “shake hands”, and “wave”. Three avatars can be seen performing the “Hallelujah!” gesture in Figure One, raising their arms above their heads. It was also possible to turn the avatar 45 degrees in either direction, helping users orient themselves “correctly” for face-to-face conversation. Communication between avatars was limited to text, and operated in two different ways: ordinary visitors' speech appeared overlaid across the bottom of the screen and scrolled upward, while those leading services were able to speak in ascending “thought bubbles” like those of the Ark. This latter option has been retained for the single-user environment now available online, where any typing appears in bubbles. Avatars could shout, speak or whisper, with shouting audible throughout the church, speaking only to avatars nearby, and whispering directed to a single selected other; the limited range of the speech command permitted many different conversations to take place in different areas of the church at once.

The site's designers chose to limit the number of avatars to thirty at a time, but permitted any number of visitors to enter the church as “ghosts” instead. A “ghost” was represented by a translucent avatar able to move around and perform gestures, but visible only to that user. The congregation of visible avatars could be surrounded by a cloud of invisible presences, a second congregation of ghosts who could see but could not be seen. The presence of this cloud of witnesses was symbolically powerful for some, as described in the section on “Worship” later in this chapter.

Avatars were simple, offered limited gesture options, and – due to the small number of choices available – were frequently identical to other avatars present in the church at the same time. Numerous duplicates can be seen in Figure One. Despite these limitations, at least some of the users of the environment identified strongly with their avatars, perceiving these visual representations as extensions of themselves, as the self in the virtual environment. One might imagine that a High Church Anglican whose worship emphasises the physical environment and ritual of worship and focuses on the physical sacraments would find the Internet unappealing as a venue for church-building, and Anna admits that her initial reaction was unpromising:

when they first started talking about online church, when it was a gleam in its papa's eye, I remember thinking that if I did not already know and like and respect some of the people involved my reaction would have been, “Oh, please!” - and that would have been that. I probably would not have checked it out at all, at least not at that time.

In fact, Anna found that the visual environment, including the avatars and their gestures, created a sense of reality that permitted the small virtual world to become, for her, a true expression of church. We will consider her comments on worship below, but her observations about the avatar itself are striking:

what stunned me was how much I identified with that little cartoon dude [...] at any given moment, it was worse than wearing the same thing to the prom, at any given moment

there might be three people in there who looked a lot like you, but I really identified with her. And what you picked an avatar that's who you kept, because that's who you were in that community. And I think it fostered that sense that those people were really people and I was a really person.

The limited range of avatars and the constant experience of meeting others identical to yourself led to the emergence of brief rituals of community interaction: '[another regular visitor] looked exactly like me, and it was a joke between us, we'd show up and say how lovely you look today, you know and stuff like that.' Rather than damaging the experience of immersion, this restriction was named and brought into conversation in a controlled and positive way by the use of in-jokes and so framed as a dimension of church culture.

Mark Howe's dissertation offers some interesting comments on this issue of identification and the importance accorded to the representation of the avatar:

In a discussion among wardens about moving towards first-person rendering, which I had expected to be about technology, but which took a decidedly metaphysical turn, an anglican minister said "I was surprised [...] how much I felt to 'be' my avatar". Others talked about the extent to which they identified with their avatar, and about whether or not this was good. Thus one warden said that we had become "way too avatar-obsessed", while another responded that "Typing the command to cross myself and then seeing myself do it was as *real* and *meaningful* as doing so with my physical hand. I would find losing that immediate feedback of my gestures a real loss." (original emphasis).²²³

These wardens – a role discussed below under “Control” – report a range of responses to the avatar, ranging from partial or complete identification to disinterest or active disapproval. For some, being represented in the space by an avatar was only a technological tool which could be improved or replaced as technology permitted but was not worthy of

²²³ Howe, "Toward a Theology of Virtual Christian Community". p55

excessive attention. For others, the level of identification actually went beyond that described by Anna above. Using the avatar was not merely an identification with a visual object, a tool that helped to foster the sense of reality, but took on a reality equivalent to the actual physical body of the user. To cross yourself physically meant the same thing as crossing yourself on-screen, and was subjectively just as powerful.

A similar comment emerged in another interview I conducted in 2007 with a Church of Fools regular called Barbara, a warden who had taken on a role leading services. At one point, she explained, she had moved her avatar into a standing position to preach in the church, and found that her legs actually started to ache in real life – a problem eased only by sending the avatar to find a seat. This identification of “correct” and “uncomfortable” ways to position the body was part of a code of proxemics that paralleled physical bodily activity, including a need to face the avatar she was speaking to, and to find a seat when joining conversations in the Crypt.

Proxemics created other communication options that might not be so readily available or socially acceptable in face-to-face situations. It was possible, for example, to position an avatar to show that the user was listening but did not wish to take part in conversation. Cara, a warden in the church, commented in an interview conducted at a meet in 2007 that she preferred 3D spaces like the Church of Fools or Habbo Hotel because she could stand back from conversation and get a feel for what was being said without becoming involved directly, an option she felt was not available to visitors to text chatrooms. Because avatars could only hear speech uttered within a certain radius, it was also possible to hide behind objects in the church, preventing other avatars from approaching and so creating space for private discussion. Cara mentioned hiding behind pillars or joining a friend behind the church organ. Another interviewee, David, preferred hiding behind the vending machines in the Crypt.

Some visitors to the church established their own areas for specific kinds of conversation. According to Simon Jenkins, ‘One group of three chairs came to be called “Atheist’s Corner”, because three atheists from the Netherlands regularly visited and sat there. They told us they enjoyed the church as a place where they could have intelligent

debate about the issues which mattered to them.²²⁴ According to conversations I have had with some of the community members active at the time, this group were aware of the limited number of avatars able to connect at once and were careful to log out before services so that others interested in attending worship would be able to do so.

WORSHIP IN THE CHURCH OF FOOLS

Jenkins reports that worship patterns at the Church of Fools evolved during the project as the wishes of visitors became clear:

Our original plan for Church of Fools was to run one service a week, on Sunday evenings, with a full liturgy, prayers, readings, a hymn and sermon. But due to the demand of our visitors, we soon started running daily services of morning and night prayer in UK time, and eventually also ran an evening service for US visitors, and other ad hoc services during the day and night.²²⁵

The Internet Archive copy of the website from September 2004 lists daily times for “simple and short services” at 8am BST (GMT +1), between 10 and 11:15pm BST, and at 9:30 pm CST (GMT - 6). These services were led by members of the congregation. Guest preachers from a range of denominations were invited to offer brief sermons at the main Sunday services, and these are still archived online.

The wardens appointed to run services ‘developed and wrote their own liturgies’²²⁶ or used more informal patterns. Jenkins has a clear idea of the kind of worship that worked best in the Church of Fools, and claims that a particular style was soon adopted: ‘short services,

²²⁴ Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels." p102

²²⁵ Ibid. p108

²²⁶ Ibid. p108

very short sermons, prayers and creeds broken down for audience participation, and plenty of opportunities for visitors to contribute with their own spoken words and gestures.²²⁷

According to Mark Howe, this semi-liturgical style emerged in response to features and limitations of the space. ‘The architecture of the building itself certainly suggested an anglican context’²²⁸, he claims, while the ‘clunkiness’ of the text interface limited the contribution that could be made by preaching. Worship leaders were confronted with a space that looked like it had been designed for liturgy, while the interface prevented them from adopting a sermon-centred format. Anna suggests another explanation, linking the style with the church backgrounds of worship leaders as well as the requirements of the space:

most of the people who were originally involved were English, and if they weren't Anglican, and most of them were, had a strong experience with that style. Versicle and response is what Anglicans have been doing for two thousand years, as long as there've been us, so that was what felt normal, reasonable and appropriate for most of us to start with. And then I was talking to Cara, and it's been years ago now, and she was saying her church does not do that but she has found that as a leader she needs to. So [...] there needs to be some component of that in virtually everything we do.

One particularly important ritual that emerged during the course of the experiment was the sharing of the Lord's Prayer. The congregation would be invited to type the words of the prayer in whatever form they preferred, leading to a jumble of different phrases and languages rolling up the screen. Jenkins includes a sample section of this ritual exchange, and explains why he found it so powerful:

Choris: Our Father, who art in heaven hallowed be thy name

Babybear: Ein tad, yr hwn wyt yn y nefoed

Jeff: Our Father in heaven

²²⁷ Ibid. p109

²²⁸ Howe, "Toward a Theology of Virtual Christian Community". p54

Peter22: Pater Noster qui es in caelis

Lillys: hallowed be thy name

Karen: thy kingdom come

Ilkku: your kingdom come your will be done

The experience of praying the Lord's Prayer together focused attention on our togetherness in prayer and worship, despite our distance in terms of geography, culture, language and faith expression. [...] Theologically speaking, it was like the coming together of the church on the Day of Pentecost, showing the unity of the church regardless of time and space. And it had big emotional impact.²²⁹

Worship in Church of Fools also made use of the range of gestures, integrated into new liturgies or deployed spontaneously by churchgoers. Jenkins mentions two examples, the "tear hair out" and "shake hands" gestures, used respectively to symbolise lament and the traditional liturgical ritual of Sharing the Peace. He includes a sample prayer in which the tearing of hair features prominently:

Leader: Let's pray for the people of the third world

for people with no food, no clean water

for people who have seen their homes demolished

for people devastated by war

Please use the 'tear hair out' gesture as we think of them.²³⁰

The shaking of hands was also used creatively, as a way of interacting with the "ghosts" who watched the service without being represented visibly. 'At a particular moment in the services, we asked the congregation to shake hands in mid-air as a way of greeting the

²²⁹ Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels." p109

²³⁰ Ibid. p110. These are real usernames, reproduced just as Jenkins quotes them.

ghosts'.²³¹ As one visitor responded, 'The whole ghost thing is rather beautifully symbolical [...] we're worshipping with unseen multitudes.'

The congregation responded during worship by using their own range of available gestures in a variety of ways. Anna, 'a fairly up-candle Anglican', commented that 'The ability to kneel, the ability for my avatar to kneel, to cross myself, were huge for me', important 'in terms of making it feel real and normal and, in quotation marks, "churchy".' 'It made it easier for me to get my head in it if that cartoon that was me in that context could kneel to pray. I was cross because she couldn't genuflect.'

David, a church elder offline, explained in our interview that he found the use of gestures helped make worship more 'corporate', increasing his awareness that he was sharing that time with others. He also described the importance of gestures in much more intimate terms. Where Anna referred to her avatar in the third person, as "she", David emphasised that his avatar was actually him. 'It was good to kneel', he explained, 'because I *was* kneeling'. When raising his hands, 'you can feel like you're doing it, no, you *are* doing it'. 'The virtual becomes the real'. Explaining the significance of this in different terms, David noted that 'I speak a lot with my body', and suggested that speaking with the body of the avatar worked in the same way as a form of expression. This combination of perceptions of the virtual as real, representation or expression can be seen again when David speaks about his motives for visiting the church to pray instead of kneeling physically. He visited the Church when it was empty partly because 'there is an element of going somewhere and making an effort', a commitment that helped focus his mind in prayer, but also because he felt the church to be 'consecrated space': 'the fabric of the virtual building is already steeped in prayer and worship', becoming 'a place that is holy'.

Jenkins records one interesting example of personal creativity in the use of gestures, reported by a ghost. Accounts from lurkers who do not visibly participate in online activities are usually hard to obtain, but in this case the ghost later joined as a visible avatar and passed

²³¹ Ibid. p110.

on their experiences. Using gestures and careful positioning of the ghost-avatar, the unseen observer had managed to create a way to join in with the prayers of the visible community:

I could only get in as a ghost until recently. It gets frustrating not being able to interact, but I found a cool way to. When I ran across someone kneeling, I would kneel next to them and pray for whatever they were praying for. Sometimes they were praying “out loud” and sometimes not, but I would just pray for them.²³²

According to some, visitors from quite different theological traditions began to use the range of gestures in very similar ways. Mark Howe writes that an ‘unexpected emergent property of worship’ in the Church of Fools was that ‘it tended to “go high”, almost irrespective of the churchmanship of the individuals involved’²³³ – everyone adopted gestures like kneeling to pray, even if they would never do so in a local church. Howe considers this to be one effect of software limitations, which ruled out most non-verbal cues and forced participants to make extensive use of the options available to them as ‘a useful way to maintain some semblance of cohesion’. Kneeling could signal comradeship with the rest of the congregation.

My interview with Anna indicated a different interpretation of gesture theology. Her responses to questions about the appeal of the church's visual style and gestures frequently referenced her High Anglican church background, and when I asked if she raised her hands in the “Hallelujah” gesture she again linked her online practice with offline customs:

No, because I don't do it in real life. I only did it if whoever the leader was said, now raise your hands for Alleluia. But it's not a gesture I do.

²³² Ibid. p110.

²³³ Howe, "Toward a Theology of Virtual Christian Community". p54

She acknowledged that other users had behaved differently, indicating that Howe's judgement that worship behaviour 'went high' was correct at least for some:

There were people who never crossed themselves because they don't do it in real life, although I do know at least two people who crossed themselves routinely there and never did in their own church in their physical lives.

CAUSING TROUBLE: TROLLING IN THE CHURCH OF FOOLS

Many of the quotations in this chapter derive from my own interviews with regulars who joined Church of Fools and are still active in the St Pixels community five years later. This level of intense commitment was not shared by all participants, and one great surprise for the managers of the project was the emergence of an enormous number of mischievous, hostile and aggressive visitors bent on causing more or less serious disruption and distress. One word for such troublemaking is "trolling", a term derived originally from a kind of fishing involving dragging bait behind a boat and waiting for fish to bite. In the same way, the "troller" acts or speaks in deliberately provocative ways seeking to elicit a reaction. The double meaning of "troll", as a fishing verb and a fairytale noun, only adds to its appropriateness in the online context. The term is now applied much more broadly and is used in the Church of Fools community to refer to any kind of deliberately offensive or provocative activity. Such actions began occurring as soon as the church was launched, and are recorded in a range of media sources. While the Bishop of London was preaching, according to Giles Wilson of the BBC, 'a new character enters the church and starts swearing, accusing the worshippers of the kind of activities forbidden by Leviticus.'²³⁴ The New York Times also noticed this unexpected event, opening its own article on the launch of the Church with an observation that 'Richard Chartres, Anglican bishop of London, is not used to having congregants wandering around in front of him swearing as he preaches.'²³⁵

234 Wilson, "In Cyberspace, Can Anyone Hear You Pray?."12-05 2004.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/3706897.stm>. Accessed 10-01-10.

235 Feder, Barnaby, "The First Church of Cyberspace; Services Tomorrow", *New York Times Religion Journal* 15-05 2004.

The designers of the church had clearly not counted on the attraction for so many people of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to run into a church and hurl abuse at the Bishop of London. The software was set up to allow anyone to “shout” statements to be heard by every avatar in the church, and avatars could move anywhere they pleased – including straight into the pulpit. Church managers soon seized the opportunity to launch a second wave of media publicity, now focused not just on the quirky idea of an online church but on the added excitement of successfully facing down Satan himself. In a brief article entitled “The URL of the Beast”, written by Jenkins and published May 20th 2004, he reports on ‘sorties by small groups who want to post racist slogans, religious abuse and experience the joy of shouting "fuck!" in a church’, focusing on one incident he considered particularly newsworthy:

It's not every day you encounter Satan in the pulpit of a church. But this wasn't any old place of worship. My face-off with the Prince of Darkness took place in the world's first web-based 3D church. [...] Disguised as a normal worshipper, I came across him ranting in our pixellated pulpit. I was logged in as a church warden, who has a smite button capable of visiting an Old Testament-style logout on the unrighteous. "What are you doing?" I asked him. "Who is this who dares approach the Evil One?" he demanded. "Well ... I'm the church warden," I replied. "Ah ..." he said, before becoming disappointingly contrite.²³⁶

This second wave of publicity generated a spike in visitor numbers, peaking at 41 000 in a single day shortly before May 25th.²³⁷

Jenkins and Howe both describe a range of other misbehaviours, ranging from entering the pulpit – like the rather mild Satan in the quote above – to standing in doorways to prevent anyone passing through. Because avatars couldn't pass through one another, a team of like-minded troublemakers could effectively seal off areas of the church and trap other

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=980CE0DA163FF936A25756C0A9629C8B63&pagewanted=1>
Accessed 10-01-10.

²³⁶ Simon Jenkins, "The URL of the Beast", *The Guardian*, 20-05 2004

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2004/may/20/features11.g2>. Accessed 10-01-10.

²³⁷ "41,000 go to church in a single day", Church of Fools News, 25-05 2004.

http://www.churchoffools.com/news-stories/03_41000.html. Accessed 10-01-10.

avatars in place. A combination of kneeling and standing avatars could ‘suggest oral sex’²³⁸. A number of avatars learned to combine the kneeling and “Hallelujah!” gestures and deploy these in unexpected locations, creating a kind of cult devoted to the worship of the vending machines in the crypt, and a rather charming video on the Church of Fools website entitled “Chat in the Crypt” shows this practice in action.²³⁹ Six male avatars are kneeling in prayer before a line of machines. Simon Jenkins' avatar stands centre-screen and turns to camera, reporting on the scene behind him: ‘And this, folks, is vending machines being worshipped...’ One avatar solemnly counts, and at a pre-arranged number the line leap to their feet, throw their arms in the air, and drop once more to their knees. The ringleader offers instructions: ‘OK everyone on 3 hallelujah, and then Jebus will come!’ - eventually admitting, after several hopeful repetitions, ‘... jesus is really lazy today’. “Jebus” is a common satirical misspelling of “Jesus”, originally attributed to Homer Simpson.

This vending machine cult is remembered with some fond affection by community members. Verbal forms of antagonism proved much more disruptive and were extremely difficult to stop. The “shout” function and the ability to enter the Sanctuary area were both quickly removed, but problems remained with less public forms of disruption – including ‘men whispering obscenities at female avatars’, using a communication option that no one else would be able to see.²⁴⁰

To some degree, behaviour like this may have been motivated by the computer-game, cartoon style of the environment itself. “Chat in the Crypt” includes one brief exchange illustrating the confusion of expectations that this visual style could cause: ‘This game has glitches’, one visitor remarks, only to be gently reminded by Simon Jenkins that ‘it's not strictly a game’. The game style was a valuable asset for the Church of Fools, generating considerable publicity and creating an unthreatening, relaxed atmosphere that many visitors found very attractive, but common attitudes to computer games include the desire to push boundaries and find hidden software flaws to exploit and to humiliate other players with demonstrations of mastery and power. According to one news story, this could cause not insignificant misunderstandings:

²³⁸ Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels." p111

²³⁹ ‘Chat in the Crypt’, http://www.churchoffools.com/view-clips/ct_536.html. Accessed 10-01-10. Section quoted starts just after half-way through the video.

²⁴⁰ Howe, "Toward a Theology of Virtual Christian Community". p34

One visitor looked around with her five-year-old son on her lap. "Wow!" he said. "Who's on your team and which ones do you kill?" – a sentiment many traditional churchgoers will recognise.²⁴¹

A considerable proportion of the trolling experienced by Church of Fools was orchestrated by myg0t,²⁴² a website community dedicated to disrupting activity in online multi-player games, and messages boasting of this project were still posted to the myg0t website in mid-2009. The relationship between Church of Fools and myg0t appears to have been mutually constructive, with both sites defining their identities to some degree through their perceptions and understanding of the other. For myg0t, the media publicity surrounding their (anonymous) attacks on Church of Fools was a triumph demonstrating the effectiveness of their tactics, while Church of Fools developed its own folk legends incorporating the persistent assaults from myg0t and similar sites into narratives of success. Several interviewees reported that one heroic church-goer had joined such a site, explained the importance of the church to its members and persuaded the hordes to turn their hostility elsewhere. I have not encountered any discourse in Church of Fools describing trolling and grieving in terms of demonic attack, something I have witnessed in more charismatic or evangelical online churches, but the presence of individuals seeking to disrupt church activity has frequently been described by regulars as evidence of the good work the church was doing. Some even found such hostility to be enjoyable in its own right; according to David, 'it's nice to get a troll now and then'. 'I loved talking to people who were not church people', he explained, and some of those who 'came in really to tease' stayed for longer conversations. Church members were 'gracious' to trolls, giving them a chance to understand the boundaries of the space, and 'sometimes that's what they want to find'; trolls 'didn't destroy anything', and their activity did not detract from his appreciation of the Christian fellowship he encountered.

²⁴¹ Simon Jenkins, "Satan loses his Sulphur", Church of Fools News, 15-04 2004. http://churchoffools.com/news-stories/02_sulphur.html. Accessed 10-01-10.

²⁴² "myg0t: The Harrassment Authority", <http://www.myg0t.com/>

One of the most interesting interviews I conducted regarding the Church of Fools was an encounter with a young American man who had himself been a troll. The viewpoints of disruptive or hostile users are often hard to access, unsurprisingly, as such visitors are much less likely to remain in the community or to participate in research conversations. Evan's account offers a rare glimpse of some of the more complex and nuanced motives that can drive what could be dismissed as mere thoughtless trouble-making. Evan treated the Church of Fools as 'a place where I could cause trouble without too many repercussions', and soon set about exploring how exactly he could cause maximum irritation. 'My first goal was to see how far I could push the boundaries', and he gleefully joined in with those praying to the peanut machine and kneeling in carefully-selected spots to trap people in pews or doorways. According to his own valuation, he didn't do anything 'major' – such as shouting 'Satan rules' – and caused most trouble simply by asking logical questions of the more conservative and less technologically-adept church leaders.

Evan's motives were mixed and complex, however, and his actions were only partly driven by a sense of irreverence and fun. Evan was a regular but discontented churchgoer in his offline life, and came to the Church of Fools looking for a space to ask questions and meet Christians he could respect. By the time of our interview he had stopped attending any physical church altogether, disillusioned by a combination of leadership change and congregational coldness. Church of Fools offered a new, different and far superior space to explore his ideas and questions. 'I went mainly for worship, when I wasn't going to cause trouble', and at times of worship 'if I was kneeling down, I meant it' – the avatar was 'not a toy, [but] a tool I was using to express what I was feeling at that moment'. Evan encountered a number of Christians in the Church of Fools who recognised the sincere questions underlying his trouble-making and became close personal friends, giving him space to ask the questions 'I didn't feel comfortable asking my pastor'. The 3D environment kept his interest, but it was the people he met who 'taught me this is the way to find your answer', helping him to move away from the black-and-white answers offered by his home church and to develop what he now felt to be a more rounded and satisfying spiritual life. These friends encouraged him, developing his confidence and talents with great effect. Over time 'I grew out of causing trouble'; when he began to feel a real part of the community, that aspect of his activity 'just dwindled away'. By the time of our interview, he had started putting his computing talents to

use helping with the programming side of the St Pixels website, had been permitted to begin leading his own Bible study, and had been appointed as a member of the leadership team.

CONTROL IN THE CHURCH OF FOOLS

Not all Church of Fools visitors were so tolerant of the hostility they encountered. According to Frank, regulars ‘didn’t want to boot people out’ but had no choice – ‘these people didn’t want to be reached’.

Responding to this kind of behaviour, the leaders of the church established a team of “wardens” with the power to remove avatars from the site. This practice was known as “smiting”, adopting an Old Testament term for the punishment of evil-doers – as Frank commented in our interview, it was ‘kind of a tongue-in-cheek way to refer to it’. The appropriation of idioms familiar to those embedded in certain forms of Christian culture was a common strategy of both the Ship and Church of Fools and resonated with some visitors – David, for example, commented in our interview that he loved the term “warden” because it was familiar to him from his church upbringing. Not all were so impressed: according to Mark Howe, the choice led to ‘much confusion with non-episcopalian Americans who assumed that the term had something to do with prison warders.’²⁴³

Howe's account of this period strongly emphasises the sacrifices of time and emotional energy made by the warden team in their attempts to protect the church space from their assailants. Most wardens were based in Europe, while most “trolls” seemed to work on American time zones, so late-night shifts were frequently demanded. These periods could be lonely, tedious and draining:

²⁴³ Howe, "Toward a Theology of Virtual Christian Community". p34

I remember one American mother describing how she had stood by the door of the church, alone, for three hours, removing trolls one by one, until they eventually gave up for the night, because she was not willing to let them spoil 'our church' or to simply close the doors.²⁴⁴

A difficult situation was complicated further by the perception of some wardens that the space – as a church – could not become exclusive and intolerant, and by the relatively inadequate design of the software tools available:

Some wardens made a difficult situation harder for themselves in operational terms because of a deeply held conviction that banning anyone from church was wrong in principle. This ruled out any of the more radical means of excluding users, and left them with a 'smite' button that was fiddly to use and, in the worst case, removed troublemakers for only a few seconds.²⁴⁵

For Howe, this determination is theologically and sociologically symbolic. '[T]he sacrificial commitment shown by the leadership team', he claims, 'could be considered to be one of the signs of authentic church leadership' - and a clear rebuttal of any suggestion that online communities might lack a sense of mutual obligation.²⁴⁶

The work demanded of these wardens was too demanding to be continued indefinitely, requiring intense commitment of time and emotional energy. Some became erratic, ejecting quite innocent visitors for choosing the Ned Flanders avatar favoured by many trolls, for standing too close to an actual trouble-maker, or for offending their personal sensibilities. Evan claimed he was sometimes banned for asking too many questions. Some wardens had to be replaced, others rested. Wardens I interviewed spoke with great fondness of one particular event, the "Warden Olympics", when the whole church was closed for a

²⁴⁴ Ibid. p58

²⁴⁵ Ibid. p58

²⁴⁶ Ibid. p58

period to let the support team relax and play games; races around the church were slightly hampered by the enthusiasm with which participants started to “smite” anyone who looked in danger of winning.

Such measures were only temporary, and neither church finances nor church staff could endure indefinitely. According to Mark Howe, ‘One consideration when closing the experiment was that it seemed irresponsible to continue to ask individuals to give so much of themselves with inadequate technical backup.’²⁴⁷ The Church of Fools survived for one month beyond its original planned existence, and closed in September 2004. The last act was a service for the wardens; after the service, Simon Jenkins spent a few moments alone in the church, and then locked its doors.

THE AFTERLIFE OF THE CHURCH OF FOOLS

The core of the church community refused to disperse and moved briefly to a new setting hosted on the Ship of Fools website. Two Church of Fools members active at the time have suggested to me that the experience of existing as a church had developed a quite different culture from the Ship, dedicated to support and collaborative leadership rather than aggressive debate and strict moderation. Recombining the two communities in one site quickly became untenable, and the two leaderships came to acknowledge the need to separate again.

Reopening the 3D church as a multi-user worship space was temporarily impossible, requiring financial resources that were not available and extensive development work that could not yet be undertaken. A text-based website was created instead, churchoffools.com, offering forums, private messages between users and a text chatroom. This was ostensibly a temporary measure while work was under way on the creation of a new 3D space. Some of the characteristics of those forums will be discussed in the later chapter on St Pixels, but two

²⁴⁷ Ibid. p58

dimensions of church culture are relevant here: the persistence of references to the 3D church, and hopes of returning there.

The dream of returning to 3D remained an undercurrent in site culture when I first joined and was raised repeatedly at meets and in publications over the following years, but with development relying on the volunteer labour of a very small handful of computer experts within the community the deadline has retreated again and again. This connection with a cherished past was reflected in the structure of the new site, where names and imagery recalled memories of the original 3D church. The site's discussion section, for example, was named "The Crypt". Registered members could select avatars, small square images to illustrate their posts and represent them in the chatroom, and these were collected from screenshots of the 3D church. I first joined Church of Fools in 2005 and adopted an image of a red armchair. I had never been in the Church of Fools 3D space, and it was some time before I realised that my armchair could once have been found sitting in the original Crypt. One individual adopted a capital letter "Y" in her username as a reference to the hands-in-the-air "Hallelujah" gesture.

Some of those who endured the move from 3D to text speak of a great and enduring sense of loss. When I interviewed Evan in 2008 he admitted that his engagement with the text chatroom 'still hasn't got to that same level' that he had experienced in 3D. '[W]hen you have something in front of you [...] when you have something you can identify with it feels more personal.' Few interviewees told me they were still waiting for a new 3D space, but Evan was sure this aspiration was widely shared. He named close friends from the 3D church who would return as soon as the environment was ready: 'That's what everyone's waiting for... for the last four years that's what I've been waiting for, I know it's getting close.'

Barbara also reported a profound sense of loss from the absence of visual cues, but here the loss was spiritual rather than one of immersion. The text chatroom lacked visual cues for sacred space, she explained. She could experience times of prayerfulness there, but this prayerfulness arose from her own personal activity, not from the natural atmosphere of the space.

Cara spoke rather of the impairment of communication in text-based chat, where conversational boundaries were much harder to signal. In 3D she liked to hide in secluded corners or take friends aside, creating bounded spaces that signalled her desire to converse with specific people or to remain silent, but a text chatroom offers one single shared communication space in which no such subtlety is possible.

A small number of regulars transferred their 3D activity to new spaces away from the Church of Fools, trying to recreate and build on the experiences they had cherished there. Cara and some of her friends purchased and furnished rooms in the virtual world “Habbo Hotel”,²⁴⁸ building worship spaces and games to attract the interest of the predominantly teenage population as a kind of missionary outreach.

Eventually, in response to comments like those of Evan and Barbara, the leaders of the Church of Fools decided to reopen a limited form of the 3D space in 2004. It remains accessible at the time of writing. Users can choose an avatar, enter the space, move around, perform gestures and listen to snatches of music and bells, but the environment is now a single-user space and no awareness of or interaction with other visitors is possible. For some users I interviewed this solitary 3D experience remained an important part of their spiritual lives for years after the closure of the Church of Fools, offering a visual focus for prayer in a space richly connected with positive memories of spiritual and social experiences.

CONCLUSION

The Church of Fools was a short-lived experiment, and seemed at times to survive only against the odds. It was, in some ways, poorly planned; its software in particular offered too little protection against hostile interference and gave too much freedom to users, failing to foresee the numbers of users who would abuse those freedoms to disrupt the fledgling

²⁴⁸ “Habbo Hotel”, www.habbo.com.

congregation. Control had to be exerted retrospectively, creating new make-shift systems to patch up some of the security flaws that had been overlooked and some of the social problems that had not been anticipated, and a sustainable system was never fully implemented before the site closed.

Nonetheless, the church can be considered a remarkable and unique success. The story of Church of Fools demonstrated some crucial principles of online religion, reinforcing some that should already have been more adequately understood, and highlighted a large number of themes and problems that would prove central to all of the churches studied in this thesis. I indicate some of these here.

First, an online church could attract extraordinary interest. Previous online ventures had gathered only handfuls of congregants, or had only encouraged direct email communication between visitor and pastor, but the Church of Fools attracted tens of thousands of visitors and scores of journalists. Online church could work on a much larger scale than anyone had previously realised.

Second, an online church could form something very much like a community. The friendships that emerged in the Church of Fools, the sacrificial commitment to service shown by the wardens and the firm sense of belonging that kept the community alive after the 3D site closed all demonstrated the weakness of many early criticisms of online religion and relationships.

Third, congregants indicated that genuine spiritual experience, both private and communal, could be found in online worship. The visual setting played some part in this, as did the avatars and their gestures, the forms of ritual used, and the prayers typed between participants. A virtual environment could play a major role in generating the experience of being in a sacred space, at least for some visitors.

Fourth, the majority of those attracted to the Church of Fools were already regular congregants at local churches – but some, perhaps many, were not. Church statistics and anecdotal reports showed that at least some visitors were not connected to religious groups, and found the online space to be a spiritually rich environment.

Fifth, familiarity was a major theme of architecture and liturgical design. The problem of generating experiences of the sacred online and framing appropriate activity could be answered by drawing on visual and ritual styles that visitors already understood. This could reinforce spiritual impact for churchgoers and indicate appropriate behaviour to non-churchgoers, and including a diverse range of familiar styles within a non-specific “church-like” environment helped avoid alienating visitors with different experiences of church attendance. Reliance on familiar styles was not just evidence of poor imagination.

Sixth, internal control was a crucial and unanswered problem. Users took advantage of communication options in unexpected ways to cause disruption, and no real solution was found to the crisis this caused. A balance had to be negotiated between theological commitments and pragmatic concerns to create a system that visitors could reconcile with their idea of “church”.

Seventh and finally, the Church of Fools experiment highlights the major interconnected themes of funding and external oversight. The church received donations to fund its start-up costs, and benefited from association with a major denomination without surrendering its independence. The anarchic, ever-changing, theologically open culture of the church might not have been possible without this freedom, and its unique environment would certainly not have come to be without funding. On the other hand, this no-strings funding only supported a scant few months of operation. Other churches have negotiated this balance between freedom, support and obligation rather differently.

We shall see these seven themes repeated in different forms and patterns throughout all five churches studied in this thesis. These are some of the core issues for online religion,

and answers can be carefully planned or dramatically fought out in very different ways. Theology, ideology, group history and key personalities all play their part in the shaping of media and media practices. This process never reached a stable conclusion before the end of the Church of Fools experiment. It would be easy to blame designers and leaders for failing to see the problems that might arise, and some degree of naivety may be diagnosed, but their oversight is perhaps obvious only in hindsight. No other online church has experienced such intensity of attacks, before or since, and none of the churches studied for this thesis set out firm guidelines for dealing with troublemakers before the first trouble arrived. The successes of the Church of Fools were quite real, and can be seen most clearly in the church's most enduring legacy: a community which remains vibrant and continues to grow and innovate today. The narrative of that community will be told in the third of these case studies, my ethnography of "St Pixels".

CHAPTER TWO: I-CHURCH

'a genuine church, a real church, in a new medium... where people pray together and communicate at depths not often seen in parish churches'.

- Colin Fletcher, Bishop of Dorchester and Chair of Trustees for i-church

In 2004, the year that Church of Fools first appeared, another project also made headline news around the world: “i-church”, an online community founded by an Anglican diocese and led by a web pastor. We see here a quite different kind of online church, reaching its own unique conclusions to the seven key themes I have highlighted.

I joined i-church in 2005, during my MA, and soon made a number of close friends. I can vouch from my own experience for the strong relationships and sense of belonging that can be generated in an online community. Indeed, for a time this was “my” church, more so than any building I might attend in my own city. I have stayed with i-church friends in America and England and have met some many times, at conferences, meets and unofficial gatherings. My winter coat contains, in one of its pockets, a rosary of sandalwood beads designed and created by a member from South Korea. From my desk, I can see a small teddy bear sporting a red jumper emblazoned with the word “i-church”, knitted as a gift by a friend in England. These close relationships and material ties are commonplace in all the churches I have studied, binding the core of each community together and attracting newcomers to join and stay. I also made some arch-enemies in i-church, foes I sparred with daily for months or years, and never once managed to convince to change their minds. The vibrancy and excitement of i-church boiled up from this mix of comfort and discomfort, both warmer and sharper than any local church I have ever joined.

History and context are crucial to an appreciation of i-church, far more so than for any of the other case studies included in this thesis. i-church has changed repeatedly in design, culture and practice, moving through five quite distinct stages, and the kind of thematic

analysis adopted in my account of Church of Fools would not be adequate. This chapter is arranged instead into five chronological sections, after a discussion of methods and sources.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter draws on my own observations, conversations and interviews and on extensive use of online archives, but also on a range of published and unpublished sources composed by other i-church members. Some members have sent me copies of work about i-church conducted for university or ordination courses. A former member of the leadership team, Ailsa Wright, addressed a Fresh Expressions conference and contributed a chapter to a volume of conference proceedings.²⁴⁹ She invited a number of church members to write brief reports describing their experiences of i-church and what i-church meant to them, and shared the full text of those reports with me.

Other sources were composed for private interest. One participant, Peter, constructed a quite brilliant and unique resource throughout 2006, writing to a diary or “daybook” charting major events, contributions to forum threads, his own reflections on worship events, lists of new members and a record of the total number of posts, and generously sent me his complete archive.

Certain factors have complicated my research into i-church and guide my use of the sources mentioned here. These factors have already been raised in my chapter on “Methodology”. In brief, I was appointed as a moderator and elected to the i-church Council in 2006, and was thus involved on several levels when an intense series of disputes broke out in the winter of 2007-08, a period when i-church had no web pastor. These disputes resulted in two developments significant to my research: first, the resignation of many of the members I had interviewed, and second, my involvement as a member of Council in a subsequent

²⁴⁹ Ailsa Wright, ‘i-church.org: The Unfolding Story of a Fresh Expression of Church <www.i-church.org>’, in Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy, eds., *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008)

disagreement with the Trustees regarding the most desirable form of governance for the church. For some Trustees my membership of the Council indicated I could not be relied upon to write impartially about i-church, particularly leadership and governance. I received a series of messages at various times challenging my ability to follow rules of confidentiality, reflexivity and impartiality with the necessary rigour. I was able to answer these inquiries satisfactorily by referring to some of the basic disciplines of ethnography designed to deal with such eventualities. I am certainly grateful to the Trustees for their continued interest in my findings, and would have found this project far more difficult without their support.

I responded to these events by adjusting my research methodology. Rather than simply interviewing members over a period of time, I now had to consider the church as a social space that had changed rapidly and repeatedly and was, particularly in 2008, highly vulnerable. Relying solely on research conducted up to 2007 would overlook subsequent developments and convey a predominantly negative image of the church that did not do justice to its merits. On the other hand, announcing to a demoralised and depleted community that I was now studying their distress and taking notes on their recovery would have been tactless at best, and would have risked harming i-church further. I decided to wait, see how the church recovered, and then include in this chapter a focus on what I hoped would be a successful and vibrant new direction of growth. This has indeed come to pass, and I have gathered impressions of this new stage in church life through observations of the site, emails with members and face-to-face meetings with the Trustees and other leaders in Oxford and London. This material is collected in Part Five.

PART ONE: BEFORE THE LAUNCH, 2003-04

A large part of this chapter – parts one, two and some of three – is based on archive research. i-church has changed greatly over time in its vision, leadership and activity. Hostility has not been a major issue, as for Church of Fools, but i-church has been heavily affected by media coverage, surges of interest, and an evolving leadership structure that at times proved unstable or ill-matched to events. The development of vision, structure and

activity highlights some of the factors guiding the ongoing negotiations between i-church members, newcomers and the diocese, helps illuminate the key dynamics that shape i-church today, and highlights features likely to be encountered in other experiments in institution-sponsored online community. Most of the founders of i-church are no longer active in the community, so archive research was my only source of this historical information.

i-church.org was launched in 2004 as part of a scheme called Cutting Edge Ministries. According to the diocese website:

'Cutting Edge Ministries' is a specific initiative, set up by the Diocese in 2002, to encourage and support new forms of emerging church. The aim was to have eight 'emerging' churches by 2010 which would be self-sustaining in their life, finance and ministry and which would act as an inspiration to others.²⁵⁰

There are parallels here with the national 'Fresh Expressions' movement, set up by the Church of England and the Methodist Council in response to the publication of *Mission-shaped Church*.²⁵¹ The report argues that parochial ministry is no longer adequate for contemporary British society, and encourages the development of a 'mixed economy' to combine parish churches with a variety of new, network-focused forms. This blending of church styles reflects what the report describes as 'the Anglican incarnational principle'²⁵² of mission to the whole of society. These new forms of church are described as 'fresh expressions', a term that 'suggests something new or enlivened is happening, but also suggests connection to history and the developing story of God's work in the Church.'²⁵³

²⁵⁰ 'About Cutting Edge', http://www.oxford.anglican.org/freshexpressions/cutting_edge.html. Accessed 28-10-07

²⁵¹ Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church* (London: Church House, 2004). http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/mission_shaped_church.pdf

²⁵² Ibid. xi

²⁵³ Ibid. p34

i-church is now listed as a Fresh Expression, and reflects some elements of that vision. The emphasis on innovation in continuity with tradition is key, and the ‘Anglican incarnational principle’ is reflected in much leadership discourse, but i-church reaches out to a far broader range of visitors than the niche communities envisaged in *Mission-shaped Church* and has shown little interest in the core Fresh Expressions goal of creating a Christian community for the “unchurched” – although, as one of the i-church members who read this chapter reminded me, this is far from unusual among Fresh Expressions nationally. Eleanor Williams found in her MA research, for example, that a third of all parishes in Ely Diocese had started a “Fresh Expression” – but when she contacted those parishes, only 29% said that they aimed their projects at people who did not yet attend their church.²⁵⁴

The vision for i-church came from the then Director of Communication for the Diocese of Oxford, Revd Richard Thomas. Thomas gained much of his confidence in online community through his participation in online discussions between Christians and pagans, stating in 2004 that ‘I have found these internet-mediated communities to be every bit as significant as the local community of faith.’²⁵⁵ Thomas did not, however, wish to be the leader of a new online church. The initial vision was his, but the task of leading the fledgling community to develop that vision would be passed on to another. The Cutting Edge Ministries project attracted over £100 000 according to the Oxford Diocese website,²⁵⁶ and this funding enabled the diocese to offer a half-time salary for a web pastor. The available funding could not last long divided between the five Cutting Edge projects, but organisers hoped that at least some of the experimental groups they created would quickly reach financial self-sufficiency.

²⁵⁴ Eleanor Williams, “Fresh Expressions in an Urban Context”, quoted by David Male, ‘Who are fresh expressions really for? Do they really reach the unchurched?’, in Nelstrop and Percy, eds., *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, p152. Published as Williams, *Fresh Expressions in the Urban Context* (YTC Press, 2007) through Lulu, <http://www.lulu.com/content/1136172>.

²⁵⁵ Richard Thomas, ‘i-church: Homily by Reverend Richard Thomas’, July 2004. http://web.archive.org/web/20040814025842/www.i-church.org/events/20040730_sd_sermoncontext.php. Accessed 28 October 2007

²⁵⁶ ‘About Cutting Edge Ministries’. <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/mission-and-evangelism/fresh-expressions-of-church/about-cutting-edge-ministries.html>. Accessed 10-01-10.

The Internet Archive²⁵⁷ saved the i-church website at different stages of its development, and we can use these records to indicate something of the development of i-church vision and activity.

The first archived page dates from January 2003, well over a year before i-church was launched.²⁵⁸ This first web page is very simple, with a plain light pink background overlaid with red and blue text, and is headed by a logo reading 'i-church.org: building god's family on the web'. This will be 'a website and a community' seeking 'to give people an alternative way to engage with the life of the church, to learn more about the Christian faith and to express their Christian commitment.' Anyone interested in becoming involved can submit their name and email address to a mailing list. The page states that i-church is run by 'Oxford Diocese, UK', but doesn't mention the Church of England. This design seeks to attract both Christians and interested non-Christians, and promises interpersonal warmth, novelty, education and self-expression.

More detailed information is recorded in September.²⁵⁹ i-church is 'a Christian community of the Church of England in the Diocese of Oxford', intended 'for those who wish to explore Christian discipleship but are not able, or do not wish, to join a local parish church.' Activities will include daily services 'according to the new Common Worship'. A section is planned 'for youth events across the country, with links to web sites; Pilgrimage and Retreat centres'. The community will be divided into Visitors and Community Members. Visitors 'can read the posts, and are welcome to any of the meetings or events', but 'Membership of the community provides a deeper level of commitment to i-church', including 'a commitment to prayer, study and action' to be decided 'in consultation with a member of the pastoral team'. Another new paragraph envisages a highly active face-to-face community life, including regular face-to-face participation in the Eucharist.

²⁵⁷ 'The Wayback Machine', <http://web.archive.org/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

²⁵⁸ 'i-church.org', January 22nd 2003. <http://web.archive.org/web/20030122165855/http://www.i-church.org/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

²⁵⁹ 'i-church', September 23rd 2003. <http://web.archive.org/web/20030927001016/http://i-church.org/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

In March 2004 the site claims that ‘an overwhelming and positive response’ has been received to the Web Pastor vacancy.²⁶⁰ Applicants for membership must now answer three questions: ‘Where did you hear about i-church?’, ‘What do you hope to get from i-church?’, and ‘What skills or resources do you bring to i-church?’. Applicants are offered a page of information about the commitment they must make to prayer, study and social action, now to be arranged in private discussion with the web pastor.

The community/visitor membership system has also shifted. ‘The community section will be a closed section on the web’, but ‘the members of the community will be visible and identifiable (with certain protections) on the open section of the site.’ This open site will include articles submitted by members and visitors for discussion, and ‘visitors will find a very rich information base reflecting the whole range of Christian organisations and activities available in the UK, from which they can resource their own spiritual pilgrimage.’ i-church will now have a monastic connection: ‘The spirituality of the community will be based on that of one of the religious communities of the Diocese, reflecting a commitment to prayer, study and social action’.

Three membership categories are identified: ‘those who wish to explore Christian discipleship but who are not able, or do not wish, to be participant members of a local congregation’, ‘those who do not find all that they need within their own worshipping community’, and those ‘who travel, either through their work or in their life-style, and who are not able to maintain relationships with a geographical Christian community’. ‘One of the key purposes of *i-church* is to provide a community for those who do not find participant membership of a local church easy, and it will therefore reflect an inclusive attitude to Christian faith and discipleship.’

This March site update coincides with a wave of media coverage of i-church, both Christian and secular. Interest was less intense than for Church of Fools, launched at around the same time, and concentrated particularly on the new web pastor. The Guardian

²⁶⁰ ‘i-church’, March 26th 2004. <http://web.archive.org/web/20040326145714/http://www.i-church.org/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

newspaper, for example, published an article in which Richard Thomas explains his vision in terms of what *Mission-shaped Church* called the “Anglican incarnational principle”:

The Church of England is rightly proud of its commitment to the whole community... As the internet is a growing part of that community, we would be failing in our mission if we didn't provide a spiritual community for people who relate with each other primarily through the Internet.²⁶¹

On BBC Radio 4's *Today* program, Thomas emphasised the importance of community-building and presented the required levels of commitment as evidence for the strength and sincerity of the relationships that would form:

to be a member of i-church you're going to have to commit to a rule of life which involves an agreed amount of prayer , an agreed amount of study and an agreed amount of social action... it is designed to be a serious attempt to bring people together in community relating through the internet.²⁶²

The first quote echoes Simon Jenkins' description of the Internet as a new city with no church, but the second is quite different from the embrace of frivolity in Church of Fools. For Thomas, it seems, i-church can be defended only by rejecting foolishness.

²⁶¹ 'Church of England to set up "internet parish"', *Guardian.co.uk*, 5 March 2004. <http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/news/0,12597,1162787,00.html> . Accessed 27-08 2006.

²⁶² Richard Thomas, interview for *Today*, Radio 4, 7th March 2004, archived http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/ss/archives/2004_03.html. Accessed 13-09 2006.

March 2004 also saw the publication of an article by Thomas for the Thinking Anglicans website, entitled ‘Why Internet Church?’, a more detailed elaboration of the intentions of the i-church founders.²⁶³ Thomas speaks again of a two-tiered structure:

By providing an internet site rich in resources for the visitor, run by a community of people who have made a commitment to i-church as their spiritual community, and are living under a rule of life of prayer, study and social action, we hope to provide a Christian community that can work alongside the traditional parish church, drawing on its strengths, and contributing to its riches.

The article broadens the expected reach of i-church still further, listing the three target categories we have already encountered but including a fourth: those who want to find resources for themselves. Self-resourcing is a vital aspect of contemporary culture that the i-church information database will seek to serve. This is a useful summary of some of those likely to be interested in church online, but no attempt is made to demonstrate that these disparate groups will be able to co-exist comfortably in one community or that their needs can be met in one form.

Integration with tradition is another major theme. i-church will be integrated into the diocese to provide ‘stability and pastoral guidance’, and associated with a religious community to offer ‘a spirituality that will give it “bottom”, a solidity that many internet communities lack.’ Thomas suggests a Benedictine or Franciscan connection, or links with another Cutting Edge group, Contemplative Fire.

The April 2004 webpage announces a longlist of seven candidates, selected ‘from a large number of applications from many parts of the Anglican Communion’, including ‘every

²⁶³ Richard Thomas, ‘Why Internet Church?’, 5th March 2004.
<http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/000499.html>. Accessed 28-10 2007

continent across the world'.²⁶⁴ This global appeal has not shifted the vision to build a collection of resources for Christians in the UK. On May 24th the appointment of Alyson Leslie is announced.²⁶⁵ Leslie was not ordained but had experience of online Christian ministry as the founder of "Web Church" in Scotland. The new pastor contributes a letter emphasising the experimental nature of the project and the rootedness of i-church in the Church of England: 'I treasure the fact that while i-church is open to, and will be enriched by, people of all church backgrounds or no church background, it will have a distinctively Anglican ethos',²⁶⁶ particularly in worship. A new partnership with Mission to Seafarers is announced, reflecting the vision of i-church to serve those who travel.

Some comparisons with Church of Fools can be drawn here. Both Church of Fools and i-church were funded by large Christian organisations in the UK, but they show quite different relationships with those larger structures. Church of Fools received a start-up grant for a short-term experiment, but no kind of oversight or obligation, and was entirely non-denominational. i-church was established by the Church of England, part of a diocese, designed by that diocese and governed by a web pastor. Church officials would offer guidance and take final responsibility. Funding did not go toward the creation of a unique new environment but largely to pay for an official leader hired by the diocese, far outweighing the start-up costs of Church of Fools. This is a quite different kind of online churchmanship.

PART TWO: ALYSON LESLIE, 2004

We now move from the planning and organisation of i-church to consideration of its launch and growth. Almost immediately, factors of geography, vision and perhaps excessive ambition led to a crisis of resourcing and strategy. The new pastor's second letter, dated June

²⁶⁴ 'i-church', April 1st 2004. <http://web.archive.org/web/20040401215045/http://i-church.org/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

²⁶⁵ 'i-church', May 24th 2004. <http://web.archive.org/web/20040524234845/http://www.i-church.org/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

²⁶⁶ Alyson Leslie, 'May newsletter', May 2004, http://web.archive.org/web/20040528065512/www.i-church.org/200405_pastoral.php. Accessed 28 October 2007

2004,²⁶⁷ reports a vast and unexpected level of interest. ‘i-church has generated a response over 20 times larger than anticipated in terms of membership - and with 1000 more inquirers on top of that’, and now has ‘700 members’ where only 30 had been expected. Leslie claims ‘There are not the systems, processes or resources to immediately deal with the demand’, refers to ‘vastly inadequate resources’, and requests another £6000 to cover the increased costs for IT support previously provided by the diocese. The focus on building a stable, monastic community is retained, so great numbers of interested applicants are simply being turned away until some decision is made regarding an appropriate way for them to participate. More positively, members are invited to attend a dedication ceremony in Oxford on July 30th, thanked for assistance with BBC interviews, and reference is made to personal phone calls between members and their pastor. Note the contrast here with Church of Fools, also subject to unexpected waves of visitors; that church expected no kind of monastic commitment, and could scale its vision to accept thousands of new participants without losing the core of its identity. i-church sought to create something much more intense and intimate, and could not respond to public demand.

Richard Thomas’s Dedication Service homily gives some insight into his thinking in this turbulent period.²⁶⁸ He begins on a cautious note, admitting that ‘it is difficult to know whether history is being made, or whether one is simply engaged in a foolish, or even fool-hardy, endeavour’. He claims ‘around 700 applications for membership, including a South American Bishop’ – note the disparity from Leslie’s figures. These people are ‘willing to commit to Christian discipleship, and to support others on the journey’ – indeed, the extent of their commitment can only be called ‘sacramental’. This is bold, given the minimal contact which has yet occurred between the site and those who have shown interest, but Thomas points out that members had travelled to be present from the USA and from Australia. I have been able to identify one American couple, of whom one was a member, but no Australians; one UK-based member has estimated that she counted 8 i-church members present.

The mission of i-church again reflects the Anglican calling:

²⁶⁷ Alyson Leslie, ‘June newsletter’, June 2004, http://web.archive.org/web/20040807001909/www.i-church.org/news/200406_pastoral.php. Accessed 28 October 2007

²⁶⁸ ‘i-church: Homily by Reverend Richard Thomas’

We have an historic responsibility, symbolised in our Monarch's dual role of spiritual and temporal care, of caring spiritually for the whole community, regardless of whether or not they come to Church... If Anglicans have a responsibility to the whole community, we would be failing if we ignored the new community of the internet.

This new community builds new kinds of intimate relationships, integrated into the everyday offline world:

we create new communities and develop new understanding not 'in cyber-space' – that place does not exist, and the Church should not be promoting it as if it did – but through our internet-mediated relationships with real people who live in real places and live real lives, with all the pain and opportunities that presents.

The monastic emphasis is reaffirmed. i-church will reflect 'a quiet, unassuming Benedictine spirituality' focused on stability – echoing Benedict's emphasis on long-term membership of a single community – and a total conversion of life, incorporating prayer, study and social action. The idea that "community members" will commit to spiritual regimes organised by the pastor, expressed in the website designs discussed above, is now rooted in ancient tradition. A Benedictine abbot, present at the dedication service, will offer support. 'Like a traditional monastery, our community will be gently encouraged to serve its visitors by providing a rich environment of Christian spirituality'.

Some aspects of this homily highlight what would later prove to be areas of weakness in i-church vision. Thomas seems to equate the 700 applicants with the much smaller community of highly committed, semi-monastic co-workers envisaged in 'Why Internet Church?'. Participants are coming to a kind of monastery in which they are prepared for their lives to be transformed in long-term relationships of mutual accountability. The key recognition that online activity is typically fluid and low in commitment, such that joining a

site by no means indicates intention to stay permanently, was central to the earlier article but is entirely absent in the larger vision of the homily.

On the day of the dedication, 30th July 2004, the Internet Archive records another complete restructuring of the website.²⁶⁹ The first page is now the entry to the site, without text of its own. A new logo appears, the word *i-church* in pale grey with the initial *i* in a much larger, flowing black italic. This change is not explained, but it seems plausible to propose an interpretation of this in line with the emphasis on authenticity, tradition and contemporary relevance – the harmony and simplicity of the design and the echo of handwriting complementing the use of hyperlinks and more standard typefaces.

Links lead to three main areas, ‘Community’, ‘Prayer and Worship’ and ‘Common Life’. “Common Life” is the new information section, and “Prayer and Worship” promises daily devotional material. The “Community section”, only open to those who apply for full membership, contains a new development not mentioned by Thomas – a number of small groups. ‘The I-church community’, it states, ‘is organised in small “pastorates” of about fifteen to twenty people who support one another, and each pastorate is led by an authorised pastor.’ Rather than permitting the development of a website with a large, rapidly-changing cloud of loosely-connected visitors and a few core posters, designers have decided to reaffirm the vision we have already encountered of stability and accountability in small-group settings.

By Leslie’s next pastoral letter, in August 2004, only two pastorates had yet been launched.²⁷⁰ The leader of Group 20 ‘has been leading a Pilot Pastoral Group which has overcome IT/email/Time Zone - and theological - challenges to connect on a trial discussion board and chatroom.’ This proved problematic – ‘few people have had experience of posting on message boards etc. I certainly underestimated the help people would need to use a fairly basic system.’ Thomas states in his dedication homily that the Church of England would be failing in its calling if it overlooked ‘the new community of the internet’, but this was

²⁶⁹ ‘i-church’, July 30th 2004. <http://web.archive.org/web/20040730192202/http://www.i-church.org/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

²⁷⁰ Leslie, ‘August newsletter’, August 2004, <http://web.archive.org/web/20040821044852/http://www.i-church.org/>. Accessed 28 October 2007.

apparently not the demographic i-church was primarily connecting with. Nonetheless, Leslie is extremely positive about the success of Group 20 – ‘There is a real sense of concern, prayer, passion and care emerging in this group - which is thrilling.’ Far less information is provided about the second Pastoral Group, which seems to have begun very recently – prayer is requested for the leader ‘as he and his group get to know each other over the next couple of weeks.’

The basic structure of i-church in these early months can be quickly described. The database of resources for visitors had not materialised in any way, but internal forums were established for different Pastoral Groups, a single chatroom could be accessed at any time, and just one forum, the “Common Room”, allowed all members to interact together. More Groups and forums were opened during 2004 and 2005, as demand required, offering a greater range of private and common spaces for interaction.

The optimism of the August letter was followed almost immediately by the resignation of the web pastor. Appointed in May for the launch in June, Leslie announced her departure in September, composing a detailed report to be published internally for the i-church community. I cannot quote that report here, but it identifies three major areas of concern echoed in interviews with members and leaders. High application numbers exposed a lack of resources, some of the expectations of members for one-to-one pastoral care could not be met by a single pastor, and the distribution of authority between diocese and i-church was unclear. The first web pastor had not expected to focus on spiritual mentoring and support, and her location far from Oxford made it difficult to negotiate changes in strategy with advisory teams based in the diocese. She also seems to have taken the 700 applications for membership at face value, concluding that the proposed system of small “pastoral groups” would require the appointment of no less than 40 authorised volunteer leaders. For all these reasons, she felt unable to continue in her post and left the church altogether.

Despite the publicised monastic vision of the site, most i-church members were not seeking a dedicated Benedictine community of service but a broad Christian ministry of worship and care that required planning and resources that i-church could not yet offer.

Richard Thomas was active throughout this period, seeking to encourage the fledgling community to develop in a more worship-focused and Benedictine direction, but there is no sign in forum archives of the presence of the abbot who attended the dedication. Thomas refers to monastic practices for examples and encouragements in his posts, using the Rule of Benedict to support requests for disputes to be handled in a gracious manner, for postings to be humble and brief, and for worship to be at the core of community life, but his monastic efforts do not appear to meet with answering enthusiasm from the community.

The development of worship during this period is particularly significant. Thomas and Leslie both claimed worship would be a distinctively Anglican characteristic of i-church, but forum archives show members contesting this perception and prioritising other activities, such as community-building or service to others. By November 2004 worship was starting to take place, with individuals and pastoral groups demonstrating initiative in the site chatroom. A thread started by one Pastoral Group leader on November 8th states that some members of her group ‘have seen some very fruitful prayer walking online’, proving that ‘God really does move even through the PC!’, and announces a weekly prayer meeting at 8pm every Friday to which all are welcome. Those attending are asked to pray before they go online, and the group leader encourages them to ‘Expect to meet with God’. Meetings will emphasise inclusiveness, and readers are urged to ‘be open in your thinking and in your praying.’ A Bible study is held every Monday. In February 2005, one member writes that he has been leading daily Vespers each night at nine for three weeks, expresses disappointment that he has encountered little interest, and protests that his prayer time was recently disturbed by another group seeking to hold an informal Bible Study.

One member I interviewed both here and in the Cathedral of Second Life, Olive, joined i-church in May 2005. Two daily services were then being held by a member from Australia, who continued this practice for one year before asking others to assist. These events attracted a committed but very small group of worshippers; Olive recalled that regular attendance over the summer of 2005 was only three.

Some founder members reported online and in interviews with me that they felt the gradual increase in number of common forums was regrettable, taking interaction and so intensity away from the pastoral groups. Not all shared this view. One group leader posted a thread in October 2004 asking members of the other pastoral groups – by now there are three in total – to meet online at a fixed time, to encourage more whole-church interaction. A number of these meetings are mentioned, with up to seven present at a time, and great enthusiasm is expressed for the ‘power’ of online prayer, but also regret that so few people are involved. These themes of excitement and frustration recur time and again in early threads; in some, almost every contribution expresses the poster’s delight with i-church and its potential.

PART THREE: RUSSELL DEWHURST, 2005-07

Ten months after Leslie's departure, a new Web Pastor was appointed. Russell Dewhurst had offered technical support to i-church as a volunteer since his arrival in late 2004, attending the dedication service in Oxford some time before he became a member. He was ordained as a curate, and moved from his curacy to become Priest-in-Charge of two Oxford parishes and Web Pastor of i-church. He announced his appointment in July 2005, took up the post formally in October and was licensed by the Bishop of Dorchester on November 30th in a special ceremony in the online chatroom. Based in Oxford, Dewhurst was able to meet representatives of the diocese far more easily than his predecessor, facilitating successful discussions of vision and structure. In a post from July 2005, the new pastor describes his role as three-fold, incorporating pastoral work in i-church, technical support and liaisons with outside individuals and organisations; ominously, this combination of roles is extremely similar to that which the first web pastor had declared impossible to sustain in her resignation letter the previous year.

This new appointment was soon followed two other changes in governance. First, Richard Thomas left his post in the diocese and, with it, his role in i-church. Second, the new pastor and the diocese agreed to increase the autonomy of i-church, replacing the existing

“Steering Group” with a new group of Trustees who would work in an advisory role to support the Web Pastor while retaining ultimate legal responsibility. I distributed a first draft of this chapter to the Trustees, and several insisted I should include particular mention of their first Chair, Alastair Hunter, praising the advice and support he offered until stepping down in 2008; I raise this again below in Part Four. i-church became ‘a Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee’, with Articles of Association governing aspects of its structure. According to these Articles, i-church ‘shall be constituted and shall manage its affairs so far as reasonably practicable in accordance with the Church Representation Rules in force from time to time and in the spirit of the Rule of Benedict’, re-iterating the continuity of i-church with customary Anglican governance and with Benedictine tradition. A new Council would be appointed to act in an advisory role, elected by the members. A Council Member would hold office for three years, just like a member of a PCC.²⁷¹ This council would work alongside an Associate Pastor, a volunteer appointed by the web pastor and soon joined by a second.

i-church stopped accepting new members shortly after the launch, waiting until the community seemed strong enough to weather periods of growth. Indeed, such was the determination to avoid the destabilising effects of newcomers that some would-be members were forced to go to great lengths to gain admittance. Martha, one of the members I interviewed in October 2007, told me that she had first applied to join as soon as the i-church project was announced in March 2004 and emailed monthly thereafter to request admission, but was only allowed to join the community at the end of May 2005. I joined after ignoring a statement on the i-church website that no new members would be allowed – I emailed the pastor directly, and was signed up. This focus on stability before growth was popular with some, as shown by the mixed response to the increasing communication between pastoral groups, and Alyson Leslie's August 2004 newsletter states that she has received ‘at least one plea to "slow things down"’:

It is not going to be easy to get the balance on this one. SO many members are eager to get started - yet we want to move at a pace that allows the groups adequate

²⁷¹ “Parochial Church Council”, an elected body chaired by the vicar or Priest-in-Charge with a major role in the administration of a parish church in the Church of England.

resources, time for learning and access to technical support in the early stages of their development.²⁷²

Archived threads reflect tensions between those eager to open the community and encourage growth and those urging caution. In December 2005, for example, Dewhurst encourages the membership to discuss the possibility of finally emailing those who had applied to join:

It's really important we grow, but at a rate that lets us remain a community where we know one another [...] I still think it's important we don't overextend ourselves. So I am very wary of doing interviews with the BBC, or posting articles to very popular websites-- we're still not in a position to respond to the demand that might create.

The earliest data for membership numbers that I have found comes from a “daybook” maintained by one member, Peter, through 2006. At the start of January he records 128 registered members, falling to 105 by mid-month when the pastor decides to delete those considered “inactive” and rising again to 230 by mid-September.

The i-church website was redesigned again in November 2005, with a new logo featuring a pink, bubble-like letter “i”:



²⁷² Leslie, 'August newsletter', August 2004.

The new website was created by Russell Dewhurst, one example of his decision to combine his web pastor role with that of technical support manager. The lettering, he explains in a forum thread, 'is meant to suggest a person, as depicted in MSN and similar applications, because i-church is a group of people who meet on the internet as a church... the current logo is supposed to be red, usually in chat programs, games etc. person 1 is red, person 2 is blue etc.' The logo emphasises both the relational and computer culture aspects of i-church. A request for a candle-logo is rejected, because 'it could suggest to some people that we are pretending to do things that other churches do, e.g. light candles. I've always felt we didn't want pictures of church buildings in the logo because that's not what we have.'

The new website made it easier to contribute publicly-accessible content. Some ordained members posted transcripts of their sermons, and Dewhurst contributed occasional articles. Visitors to the website could post prayer requests, which the two Assistant Pastors would moderate and respond to. Dewhurst also restructured the forums, dividing them into "Prayer", "Study" and "Social Action". This rearrangement was a reference to the Benedictine origins of i-church, where a rule of life including these three elements was to be followed by all committed members. The Prayer section included prayer requests and discussions of spirituality, while Study included theological debate, Anglican church news and Bible discussions. Social Action was perhaps the least successful of these areas, implying attention to communal projects that never took place. While conversation about world news could be conducted, the community rarely shared a common mind on any social issue and valued the inclusiveness of its membership and the honesty of its conversation too highly for any attempt to mobilize support for a cause to succeed. A fourth section, the Sofa, was eventually added to gather threads for conversation and wordgames. A fifth dealt with technical questions and inquiries about church policy, and further forums were reserved for private access by pastoral groups, Council, Moderators and others.

Worship times increased throughout 2006, as recorded in the "i-church daybook". The first entry in January notes that 'Preparations for Candlemas observance are underway', an event held at the start of February; seven attended the first service, intended for the GMT time zone, and six attended a later event scheduled for the USA. Plans for Easter events are almost immediately set in motion. A new daily service is scheduled in February for 0300

GMT to suit US time zones, adding to the two service times already scheduled for 10am and 9pm GMT. A one-hour weekly Bible study also takes place. These services are shared between a small number of leaders, some of whom are responsible for one or even more events every day. When one Australian member announces he must step down from the prayer team in March, Peter comments on the commitment that leader had made to a schedule designed for UK-based congregants: '[He] has made a very significant contribution in getting daily prayer on its feet here. There were many days when he prayed alone. And the poor man spent his wee hours every morning praying evening prayer!' This intense commitment was not unique; when the first 0300 service was held, Peter notes that the five in attendance included two logging on 'in the MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT from the UK!'

These text services could follow several patterns. I have been given a complete transcript of the first 0300 service by one of those present. The leader typed out long passages from a book of Benedictine meditations, divided into brief lines to ease communication in the chatroom and concluded with responses. The responses – Amen, peace be with you, Christ have mercy – are not explicitly requested, but those present clearly understand church language well enough to react without prompting to the appropriate cues. A period of silent meditation is included, and the service ends by offering each participant the chance to contribute their own prayers. These are quite extensive, ranging from ten to twenty-nine lines in length. Not all services included all of these elements; a transcript from November 2005, for example, shows a small group gathering for prayers that each contributes spontaneously, and this pattern is the one I most frequently found in my own visits to i-church worship. Services could also include a recitation of the Lord's Prayer, conducted silently with only the first line and the Amen typed; anyone in attendance was expected to know the words by heart.

Space was used to some effect in these text services. The chatroom was divided into two in February 2006, a "chapel" and a "café", and transcripts show participants moving into the chapel to start their worship and out again when worship ended. This transition was not firmly marked, and those present would often engage in some minutes of social conversation before someone suggested a move. Olive wrote a thesis about i-church in 2009 as part of her training for ordination, and discusses the significance of these rooms. Moving between

chatrooms, she writes, ‘was a way of defining what was for sacred purposes.’ A new room, the Sanctuary, was added later for silent prayer: ‘the convention was that mostly only one person would be there at once, and no chatting of any kind would go on if two or more were there.’

At services I attended in 2006 and 2007, those gathering for worship routinely engaged in a game to mark the end of each service. Participants would roleplay some of the actions that might be shared by a local congregation, like finding seats, pouring pints and making coffee. Some made the role of virtual “bartender” part of their daily contribution to church life. According to one regular I interviewed at the end of 2007, this daily activity was part of the routine, a sign of shifting gears between worship and conversation, and ‘almost part of the liturgy’. As a reference ‘back to the real world’, such playful uses of words enabled those present to ‘reach out and touch something we’re familiar with’, ‘simulating proximity’.

Some experimented with voice-based worship and prayer, but reported mixed results. Music files could be found online and links posted to chat, with visitors asked to play them on cue, but this proved too complex and susceptible to failures. Over months of chat and email exchanges with another member, Olive explained by email, ‘I would say that [he] became one of the people with whom I could share anything at all’. Eventually they tried to communicate through voice chat:

It actually felt no different from when I talked to a couple of other people that I really don’t know well. I was disappointed and surprised [...] In our next contact we used text and both noted that we could share things better that way [...] We seemed more open and honest [...] I could actually feel [him] with me much better than when I could hear him.

Another member wrote of a more positive experience:

once or twice four of us experimented with sound. There was a man in the Windward Islands, one in Oxford and one in China, plus myself. I did the hymn-singing and being gentlemen the others did not complain.

Non-text media were used more successfully elsewhere. One i-church project involved asking members around the world to record chapters of the Bible to be posted online and linked into worship services, and some progress was made with the Gospel of Mark. At the end of 2006, a member began an ambitious project creating devotional videos and posting these to YouTube, and reported with much delight as these began attracting hundreds and in some cases thousands of views.²⁷³

At this stage, we can introduce some statistics to describe the i-church congregation. Dewhurst decided to conduct a membership survey in 2006 and emailed all 250 registered members, receiving 114 responses. This strategy resulted in the collection of data from frequent and infrequent visitors to the site, but data was not analysed according to this variable and we have no way to discern how frequency of activity relates to the other factors discussed here.

Still, the results provided are interesting. Six continents are represented. The majority of members, 60%, are male. 60% live in Britain, 20% in the United States, less than 5% in Canada, Australia and the Netherlands respectively, and ten other countries record one member each. The first language of 92% of members is English. 50% of respondents are aged between 31 and 50, just over 30% between 51 and 70, and 5% 71 or older; only 13% are 30 or younger, and those under 18 are not allowed to join at all. This contrasts dramatically with Church of Fools, which claimed a full 50% of visitors were under 30, but the gender divide is almost identical.

²⁷³ 'ichurchvids Channel', <http://www.youtube.com/user/ichurchvids>. Accessed 10-01-10.

20% of respondents report some kind of ‘mobility problem’. The survey included space for members to describe their own health problems, and the report lists 20 different categories of reply, including mobility problems restricting the respondent to the house or preventing use of a car, ‘mental health conditions’, depression, and various conditions that left the respondent ‘uncomfortable in crowds’.

96% of respondents describe themselves as Christians, with one atheist, one agnostic and one ‘other’. 65% of those Christians are ‘Anglicans’ and 18% ‘Protestant’, with 3% ‘Roman Catholic’. Theological ‘liberals’ outnumber ‘conservatives’ by more than three to one, 40% to 12%; 24% describe themselves as ‘central’ and 20% as ‘other’. This overwhelming Christian presence does not translate so evenly to church involvement, however: while 93% say they regularly attended a local church at some point in the past, only 50% do so now, and 35% do not attend at all. 25% describe i-church as ‘my main church’ and 50% as ‘one of the churches that I belong to’, but 24% consider it ‘just an interesting website’ - denying that i-church is a church at all.

Those who have ceased to attend church were invited to select one or more from a list of 13 motivations. Half indicate that church-going is unnecessary or gave no spiritual nourishment, a quarter that their church was unwelcoming, they were too shy, or the church did not meet their health and mobility needs, and 20% reported that they did not agree with church teaching. Just over 10% found no church in their local area.

The final category of questions that we will consider here relates to the respondents' use of the i-church website. Just over 10% reported logging in to the site several times each day, 20% daily, just under 20% weekly, 25% monthly, and 14% less frequently than that. Two members did not log in at all. Site structure at this point included the external website, internal forums and chatroom, and of these options the forums were by some margin the most popular form of interaction. 40% read the forums “frequently” and 50% “sometimes”, but only 20% posted frequently, 50% sometimes, and 20% not at all.

The chatroom was frequented for both worship and conversation, but not by all members. 13% worshipped ‘frequently’ and 45% ‘sometimes’, suggesting at least 15 regular and 52 less frequent worshippers. Comments on this question are summarised in the survey report, and suggest divergent perceptions of online worship: ‘Rarely go to chapel for prayer but i-church still considered main church’; ‘Chapel is dominated by a club like other churches, so not in accordance with Jesus’ teaching’; ‘Too structured’; ‘Not formal enough’. Half described the web pastor as ‘very important’ and another quarter as ‘fairly’ so and only 6% agreed that ‘we should rely entirely on volunteers’. This suggests that 94% wanted the church to receive an income, but only 14% actually supported i-church financially.

The interviews I conducted in 2007 and 2009 offer some more insight into these results, illustrating some of these responses with accounts from members active at the time.

Martha explained that she had been brought up Roman Catholic and ‘kicked out’ at the age of 13 for asking too many questions. She hadn’t attended church in 30 years, choosing instead to read the Bible on her own. She had used computers since the days of punch-cards, however, and joined i-church as soon as she heard of its launch. When I asked why she stayed, she emphasised the strong relationships she had made, speaking of close i-church friends who ‘would kill me if I left’. She now spent 2 to 4 hours in i-church every day, largely avoiding the theological discussion areas, considering these to be colonised by ‘experts’ waiting to ‘thrash’ any newcomers who dared to disagree with them. Worship was a great pleasure, a kind of meditation that helped her ‘tune out everything else’; she mentioned setting her answerphone to screen all calls during service times. She considered i-church ‘my only church’, and claimed the same would be true for around a quarter of the people she knew there.

Lucy’s story shows similarities and contrasts with Martha’s. She attended church well into adulthood, but disliked it so much – particularly her vicar – that she ‘felt ill driving there’. A friend suggested i-church. She found the warmth of her welcome ‘amazing’, ‘totally a contrast to what I was getting at b and m’ (bricks and mortar, a common i-church term for local churches), but had no intention of letting the Internet provide her with her main church

experience. Unlike Martha, she felt the Eucharist was of vital importance and cited this as a major reason for continuing to connect with a church offline.

Esme describes her i-church activity as an escape from the restrictions imposed by serious illness. She has emailed three essays to me, six pages in total, and one of these explains:

Owing to the timing of medical treatment and other health issues I have over the years found it more and more difficult to attend a church building or even go to midweek house fellowships and bible studies. [...] It can be imagined what a help it is to me to be able to worship from my own home.

The emergence of true churches on the internet has been a boon for me. It has been something I have waited and prayed for. The feeling of worshipping with other Christians and talking about theological issues with like-minded people (and being instructed in other areas or argued with by those who know what they are talking about) has been restored to me.

For Esme, one of the most vehement defenders of the role of web pastor, ‘the knowledge that those leading are from a true Church such as the Church of England or another denomination in communion with it’ is ‘invaluable’. Martha also felt the web pastor was important, but for practical reasons: ‘you have to have a captain’ to steer the ship. Scott joined i-church in 2005 specifically because it was Anglican. He considered the link with the Church of England, the Rule of Benedict and the Web Pastor to be three factors that proved the church had a solid and trustworthy foundation. Lucy, in contrast, considered i-church more inter-denominational than Anglican, had never interacted with the Web Pastor, and thought a good council of members could manage the church adequately without his leadership.

Peter was one of those who considered i-church ‘just an interesting website’. Peter had compiled his own private daybook of i-church events, regularly attended worship, made firm friends in the community and contributed daily posts to discussion threads, so his views

did not reflect a lack of commitment or influence his style of participation. Nonetheless, he explained by email, ‘online church was for me pretty much a fun thing to do...a social activity, rather than a genuine church membership.’ He acknowledged that some members did consider i-church to be their church, and did not dispute that decision, but did not share it himself. Eventually, this difference of membership categories led him to resign from i-church altogether in 2008: ‘it began to feel to me like I wasn't being sufficiently respectful of what i-church was to some folks... people like me weren't really helping matters for those who depended upon the online church experience in a more important way.’ Several other interviewees shared Peter’s views, also describing i-church as a community or website rather than a church, but explained their scepticism quite differently: no online group could celebrate Communion, and Communion was a necessary requirement for any real church. Just like Peter, these members could be as committed and active as any other.

A very rare face-to-face meeting was organised in Oxford in January 2007, gathering the pastor and Council from the UK and USA to discuss strategy and direction with members of the Trustees, and I travelled down from Durham to attend. This “Vision Meeting” re-assessed the legacy of the vision created by Richard Thomas and discussed earlier in this chapter. The division between “Community Members” and “Individual Members” was dropped, as an unpopular and theologically-indefensible division of the church community into two status categories, and with it went any lingering expectation that all newcomers to the church would eventually enter pastoral groups with authorised oversight. The Benedictine idea receded still further into the background of church culture. A new site design was envisaged, with a greatly expanded range of public-access material and discussion spaces, a move that one Trustee described as ‘opening i-church to the world’. Some aspects of Thomas' ideas were dropped, but this key and so far unrealised part of the original purpose of i-church was brought back to the fore. Finally, the meeting re-emphasized i-church’s commitment to the role of pastor and decided to raise the profile of financial giving among members. Far from scaling back their financial commitments, they decided to create a new post of “web designer”, paid an honorarium to take over some of the duties then tasked to the web pastor.

2006 was a high point for a particular vision of i-church community life. The church was led by an able and enthusiastic web pastor, supported by a Council with every place

filled, and looked forward to continued growth. The financial burden faced by the church was a serious concern, with the three-year diocese grant due to expire in 2007, but in most other respects i-church appeared to be a success. The survey had indicated that a major section of the church community attended church nowhere else, that a smaller but still very significant portion considered i-church to be their main church, and that many members faced health and mobility problems that prevented them from encountering interactive, communal Christian ministry in local settings. Few members worshipped regularly in the i-church chatroom, but many more attended on an occasional basis. The vision meeting suggested a new and optimistic stage in church life was about to begin.

PART FOUR: THE INTERREGNUM, 2007-2008

In fact, the decisions made at this meeting were only partly set in motion. “Individual membership” was abandoned and new groups established, but the new site design never materialised. One major factor in this delay was another change in governance, when the decision to combine the roles of web pastor and web designer finally proved unsustainable. Russell Dewhurst announced his resignation from his post in May 2007, after a little less than two years, citing his desire to focus on his parish work and return to the study of canon law. The church now entered a period without a pastor, lasting for almost a year, and the focus of the Council shifted to the task of turning an advisory body into a decision-making one. With no leader, any decisions would now have to be made by discussion and vote and no procedure was in place to manage such a policy. As the interregnum period continued, and an attempt to appoint a new web pastor found no suitable candidates, at least some members began to feel that this phase of church life would be a permanent one.

In some ways, church life flourished. The worship schedule continued to increase, as described by Ailsa Wright, then the Lay Chair of the Council:

There are four or five services every day [...] The worldwide nature of i-church [...] allows for the meeting of a congregation from many countries. There are seventeen worship leaders, some of whom lead at a regular time every week and some who help now and again. Special services are held at Christmas, New Year, Lent, Holy Week and Easter, Pentecost and Harvest. [...] There are plans to have an online retreat. A weekly Open House takes place where discussions on the Bible or current affairs are held. There are also occasional visits from special guests.²⁷⁴

These four or five services still included meetings in the morning, at 9pm and at 3am, but also a gathering in the early afternoon and a Compline service at 11:30pm. This proliferation of service times and leaders should not be interpreted as evidence of any great increase in the proportion of church members who attended worship regularly, and congregations remained small, but more of those who did attend were now encouraged to lead.

These times of worship were powerful for some. Heather, unable to attend church due to ME, wrote movingly of her own experience:

I will never forget the day I first went into the I-Church chapel online. [...] Quietly but dramatically that evening during Compline, my messy lounge was transformed into a sanctuary. I experienced Emmanuel: God with us, sitting in front of my laptop!

She goes on to comment on the importance of regular connection with i-church friends, and speaks of her own achievement in taking on a leadership role. 'I now lead Compline once a week. It isn't much but it means a lot to me to be able to do something - even if I'm wearing my pyjamas and laying on my sofa.' For Lucy, the Compline service was peaceful, simple, and a good way to end her day; she commented in our interview that she

²⁷⁴ Ailsa Wright, "i-church: the unfolding story of a fresh expression of church", in Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (eds), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2008), p128-9

benefited greatly from the diversity of worship styles favoured by the different leaders, and used Celtic liturgies in her own services.

Another face-to-face gathering was organised in Oxford, attended by members from the UK and the United States and by representatives of the Trustees. New forums proliferated, activity seemed to increase, and new members joined the site, although one policy first undertaken by the second web pastor – the occasional mass deletion of all accounts deemed “inactive” - makes it very difficult to work out how far the community had really grown. Work began on a new church website to realise some of the ideas of the 2007 Vision Day, and this project was led by a newly-appointed web designer who discussed his work with the church community through special forums. One member of the church was appointed to the Board of Trustees, ensuring for the first time that the Trustees had some direct participation day-to-day in actual i-church life.

Other indications suggested less positive developments. One such development was the persistence of sub-groups within the church, partly fostered by the long-running site emphasis on small, private-access forums. Specific clusters of members communicated together, supported one another in all circumstances, and shared divergent views of what i-church had been, was and should become. Most importantly, the church had no clear structure for decision-making, and the departure of the web pastor had left a maze of different individuals and groups – previously operating as his advisors – in leadership roles that were now unclear. Two Associate Pastors had been appointed in 2005, and both had independent roles in some areas of church life that were not overseen by or accountable to anyone else. The Trustees still had legal responsibility for the church, but had seldom needed to use these powers to intervene directly in church life. The Council could make decisions, but a dozen people were involved in those discussions and consensus always took time. Such consensus was in theory guided by a Lay Chair and Deputy – the Deputy, in fact, was me – but as far as I was aware those two roles were not supposed to make independent decisions at all. Other departments, meanwhile, included the Moderators, who were deadlocked over the idea of introducing some rules to standardise their moderating activity, the Pastoral Group Leaders and Spiritual Direction Group Leaders, who in some cases claimed the seal of the confessional prevented them from letting anyone else know what went on in their groups, and

many more. Each had some sort of authority, some sort of accountability to someone else, and usually only common sense, friendship and trust to help them work out where those boundaries lay.

Meanwhile, church culture was shifting. In an unpublished essay in 2007, I suggested that the web pastor had occupied a role that was of primarily symbolic importance, such that the unity of the group derived not from shared values, shared history, or even a shared set of practices, for all these were regularly contested, but from common allegiance to a set of Anglican symbols. The web pastor, as a focus of universal deference, acted to hold together the diversity of the group without providing the symbolic or material resources for any one view to become dominant. When the web pastor departed, this balance became unstable, as I wrote at the time:

I consider the absence of the web pastor to have removed one major source of unity and so encouraged the emergence of the tensions his presence had partially suppressed. It is not that new tensions have arisen, but that those present since the first launch of the church are now competing more warmly for dominance.

The web pastor was not only a symbol of unity, but a symbol of final authority. Without that position, decisions could only be made by consensus. While this potentially liberates a group from external or hierarchical influences and gives authority to local wisdom it also creates both the possibility and the expectation that the loudest or most popular voices will be able to state their cause and win decisions in their favour. In other words, those who wished for change now had a structural route to make that change happen, and when victory seems possible battle is far more worthwhile. Should a suitably emotive cause arise, i-church could be poised for disaster.

That cause did indeed arise, at the very end of 2007. Too lengthy a discussion could unbalance this chapter, toward consideration of church conflict rather than the quite genuine achievements before and after this period. I must also reiterate the significance of my own

perspective, as a participant in governance who happened to be present during these events. I have good evidence that Church of Fools, St Pixels and the Anglican Cathedral, at least, have all experienced conflicts comparable in intensity to this, and since by chance I was either not a member or not one with access to the relevant forums during those periods the chapters I have written to describe those groups have not been so significantly shaped by those events. Nonetheless, some aspects of that crisis are informative, and its absence here would leave a quite misleadingly one-sided and positive impression of i-church history and culture.

The events as I perceived them can be briefly related. One relatively new member stated that she was autistic, and so had difficulty following rules and interpreting conduct. She then announced that the leader of a private “Spiritual Direction” group had banned her from communicating with group members; when the i-church community reacted to this with dismay, the group leader stated that his actions were covered by the seal of the confessional and, at least in the eyes of some members, the Council supported him. Amid a maze of other subsidiary complaints and issues, now returning to the forefront of debate, focus turned on the Council; were they not permitting the mistreatment of this member, and in doing so were they not showing they needed to be reformed? Complaints flew in all directions, followed eventually by legal threats and the public distribution by one Council member of a series of private postings made by another relating to the individuals concerned. Soon after, I received an email informing all i-church members that the website could no longer be accessed. The Trustees had intervened, and the situation would now be resolved at a higher level. I was not part of the discussions they held at this time, but Trustees who read this chapter expressed firm belief that the whole church would have been shut down by the diocese without the commitment they had shown to finding solutions to the crisis; Alastair Hunter, the Chair of Trustees, was particularly praised for his support.

These events can be interpreted along several different dimensions: according to the personalities involved, the differing perceptions of what kind of place i-church was, the conflicting values of safety, peace, justice and self-expression, theological conflicts between ideas of episcopal and congregational leadership, the significance of deliberately creating exclusive and long-standing sub-groups within the church through the promotion of private forums, and so on. Here, I will only observe that the difficulty faced in resolving these events

can be related very closely to the absence of any clear, quick, universally accepted source of decision-making. It was not possible for any one individual or group to announce a decision, expel a member or silence a conversation, for the authority to do so was too loosely distributed to be swiftly deployed and too hotly contested for any decision to be accepted. The only solution would be a reorganisation of the system of governance, a restating of the vision, purpose and unity of the church, and a new growth and flourishing to replace the energy, optimism and good-will – and the numerous participants – that had been sapped away by the dispute.

PART FIVE: PAM SMITH, 2008-2009

The only solution, in fact, was a return to the system that had worked in the past: the appointment of another web pastor. The Trustees would later insist that this had always been their intention, but some at least in the i-church community had begun planning for a permanent existence without a salaried, ordained leader and were taken entirely by surprise. This time the Trustees declared their choice of pastor without publicly advertising the post, as they had done before, and announced a streamlined governance system in which they kept legal responsibility, the web pastor made decisions, and they, the Council and certain co-opted officers would advise the web pastor as appropriate. The new pastor, Pam Smith, was ideally suited in experience and training: she had worked in team and parish ministry, and had been a Church of Fools warden, a St Pixels leadership team member and part of the i-church community.

At a face-to-face meeting in Oxford in 2009, over a year after these events, the Trustees described the absence of the web pastor as a crucial factor in the difficulties i-church had faced. According to the new pastor herself, ‘there was just a huge insecurity’ about who was able to make which decisions – a suggestion very similar to the analysis I offered above. A pastor was able to make clear decisions swiftly, and could take on a ‘boundary-setting’ role to create safe spaces. Both pastor and Trustees suggested that the experience had shown the importance of appointing an experienced, ordained person to the role, both for practical

reasons – such an individual would have been trained for community management during the process of ordination – and for less clear-cut theological motives: according to one Trustee, the church had suffered in the interregnum for the lack of a priest in leadership. The existing diocesan system had saved the church further damage: without that structure, the new Chair of Trustees claimed, i-church ‘would have closed... it would not have survived in a recognisable form’.

All but a few Council members and officers left over the next six months, finding the shift from decision-making to minor advisory group unbearable. They were replaced by co-opted officers more amenable to the task and, in due course, by a full election. My own 3-year term of office came to an end and I did not seek re-election, focusing time on my writing instead. A new web designer was appointed, working closely with the pastor. With one trusted person in charge, communication with the Trustees became simpler, delegation to trusted aides far more successful, and decision-making swift and firm. Not only could the church start to recover from its troubles, but a new flexibility and speed could be brought to the long-running attempts to develop the community and website.

One significant development instigated by the new pastor related to i-church worship. Services had proliferated to four or five each day, but remained dependent on a small number of regular congregants; when some of these left the church or scaled back their commitments, service times began to run with no congregation at all, or no leader. In response, the entire worship team were put on indefinite leave and worship suspended. When services recommenced the packed schedule was replaced by just one weekly event, on a Sunday, led by the web pastor. The church had ‘massively over-reached ourselves’, Pam Smith explained to me in one of our interviews, and needed to let projects and teams start to build up again organically as new and enthusiastic people joined the church or stepped forward from the membership. In fact, she suggested, a “Fresh Expression” of church should not be built primarily around worship, but around community, mission, and asking the membership what they actually wanted to support and offer. This idea is echoed by David Male, who observes a

general trend among Fresh Expressions groups to move from service, to community, to discipleship, and only then to worship.²⁷⁵

A range of service times were tried, and a new “worship co-ordinator” was appointed. In September and October 2008 I attended services at 9pm on Sundays, but also at 10pm and 9:30am mid-week, with congregations ranging from 2 to 5. These services made exclusive use of text and followed a liturgical pattern of set prayers, responses and readings, taken from Anglican or Celtic texts, followed by a time of open prayer with contributions from those present. Services lasted up to half an hour. A homily of some 30 lines was added, a feature I had not encountered before.

The new web pastor also oversaw the introduction of a new website in October 2008, updating the range of available media for the first time since 2004. This new site follows some of the elements encouraged by Richard Thomas and by the Vision Meeting in 2007, creating a more vibrant and interactive public-access website with a range of multimedia resources.

The screenshot below shows the church website as it stood during Lent 2009, demonstrating some of the innovations now available. The new “globe” logo was first introduced during the interregnum, and shows Europe – and so Oxford – at the centre of the image; one interesting debate in 2007 sought to decide between a Western-hemisphere image and an Eastern-hemisphere image, respectively taken to symbolise the origins of i-church and its current global reach. The logo is here circled by the words “i-church” and “ecclesia via media”. The “via media” is an Anglican theological doctrine, invented in the 17th century and popularised in the 19th by members of the Oxford Movement to present the Church of England as a “middle way” between Catholicism and Protestantism, and here of course it offers a pun on the electronic media of i-church – a joke presumably only comprehensible to visitors with a reasonable grasp of Anglican church history. The words were later replaced by the somewhat more prosaic statement, “Diocese of Oxford”.

²⁷⁵ David Male, 'Who are fresh expressions really for?', p156



The central horizontal bar shows the range of interactive options now available. In place of the sermons and articles once uploaded at sporadic intervals, the visitor can now access “Public Forums”, start their own blog, or join the “Community”, where the old private forums can still be found. Separate usernames can be registered for the public and community forums, and no requirement is made for real names to be used in the public site. At least a few of those regular members who had left the church during the events discussed above returned to post in the public site, and they have been joined by community members and new posters.

The lower half of the screen is dedicated to resources authorised by the i-church leadership and themed around the church year. The images displayed link to the weeks to be covered during Lent and Holy Week leading up to Easter. For each day of the week, a link is offered to a song, image or written reflection composed or created by an i-church member. A kind of blog is kept from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, and each entry includes a Bible reading about the events of that day, a reflection on some aspect of that reading, and a series of illustrative photographs. One or two comments have been posted to each. i-church also made use of Twitter throughout Lent, inviting readers to visit the i-church website. 50 followers registered to receive these messages. A similar project was launched during Advent in 2009, creating an Advent Calendar with a song, image or reflection behind each ‘window’;

many of these resources were created or chosen by i-church members, as before, but contributions also came from Pam Smith's friends and acquaintances in St Pixels and Second Life.

I include a screenshot of the full homepage here, as it can be seen in January 2010. The homepage has now been renamed "The Gatehouse", and forums can be found in "The Courtyard". The Gatehouse is coloured throughout in pastel shades, all resting on a white background. No images of churches are included – in keeping with Russell Dewhurst's design philosophy, quoted above – but a stained glass window now appear. Photographs of nature are included. A line of black-and-white images at the bottom of the screen illustrate a range of links to online resources, parts of the i-church site, and staff e-mail contacts; these images combine suggestions of relaxation, human companionship and technology. A passage of text in the centre describes i-church as 'an online Christian community based on Benedictine principles', and invites the viewer to come to "The Courtyard" – 'the place where we interact with the world'.

I conducted a brief content analysis of i-church's public forums on 6th July 2009. The forums were divided into three areas: "A Place To Talk", "Prayer" and "Lent". The last of these was intended for responses to the Lent program, and has since been closed. "Prayer" included 13 topics and 263 replies, 126 posted to a "Prayer Requests" thread and the remainder divided between prayers and discussions. "A Place to Talk" included theological discussion, current affairs and wordgames. 68 topics received 1766 replies, 910 shared between the most popular three games. The most popular discussion threads are entitled "Where has my faith gone and does it matter?", "Things I want to know about Christianity", and "The Quadriety", a thread asking if the Trinity might have had four persons rather than three.

The "blogs" section attracts a relatively small number of contributors. 20 blogs had been started by January 2010, but 11 had received only one post and only 8 have been updated since July 2009.

i-church

Welcome to the Gatehouse



Why not join us in prayer?



We have a [prayer forum](#) where you can add your prayers and pray with us, and also [written prayers](#) for personal use.

If you would like to post a prayer or a comment, [please register here](#).



i-church is an online Christian community based on Benedictine principles.

i-church was founded by the Diocese of Oxford in the UK but has members all over the world.

This is the Gatehouse, where you will find information about us and our activities, and links to other parts of i-church.

The Courtyard is the place where we interact with the world - our public forums. We would love you to join us.



CNN's iReport carries an interview with our very own Priest-in-Charge, Pam Smith.




Why not visit our bookshop?

We have a wide variety of interesting books specially selected by and for i-church. If you have an Amazon account you can order anything from Amazon, and if you access their website using the Amazon link on the left hand menu of our bookshop, we will receive commission.

[Enter the bookshop here.](#)

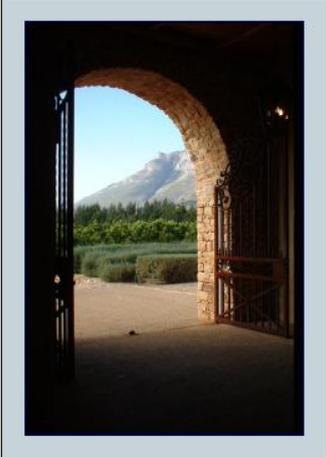


From 15th - 21st November 2009 the Interfaith Network held the UK's first Interfaith Week.

As i-church's contribution we gathered a collection of prayers from different faith traditions. They can be seen [here](#). We hope you will enjoy them.



Bees work for man,
and yet they never bruise
their Master's flower,
but leave it having done,
as fair as ever and as fit to use;
so both the flower doth stay
and honey run.
- George Herbert


Fancy a break? Need to unwind for a few minutes? Why not play with our hamster, poke our penguin, take out your frustrations on our bubblewrap, or play our games?

PRAYER RESOURCES

- [Prayer Requests](#)
- [The Northumbria Community](#)
- [Church of England Daily Prayer](#)
- [Oremus](#)
- [Wellspring](#)
- [Celtic Prayers and Resources](#)



EXPLORE I-CHURCH

- [Forums](#)
- [Blogs](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Lent and Holy Week Advent](#)
- [Interfaith Prayers](#)
- [Information about i-church](#)



CONNECT

- [The Diocese of Oxford](#)
- [Ship of Fools](#)
- [rejesus](#)
- [Cartoon Church](#)



CONTACT

Pam is Priest in Charge of i-church.
Caroline is Technical Co-ordinator.
[Information](#) about i-church
[Donations](#)



'The Gatehouse', i-church.org homepage, 20th January 2010

At the time of writing, neither public nor private forums seem to have reached the levels of activity seen in 2006 and 2007 – although I have no data to show how many visitors view material without posting. This is, to some degree at least, a function of the deliberate emphasis we have already seen on stability over growth. The crisis of 07-08 led to the departure of some high-volume posters, and these have not been replaced. Visitors to i-church are attracted either by word of mouth or by some personal motivation that leads them to go online and search for an internet church; these new members tend to be relatively few. Should the pastor and trustees decide at some future point that i-church is now stable and secure enough to cope with an increase in its activity, this is likely to change.

CONCLUSION

At my face-to-face meeting with the Trustees in 2009, we discussed the merits of i-church and the lessons the diocese had learned. The current Chair, the Bishop of Dorchester, declared his conviction that this was ‘a genuine church, a real church, in a new medium’, something he first realised at the online licensing service for Russell Dewhurst. The founders had hoped to use the Internet to create a way into church for those with no history of Christian involvement, but the presence of many who had been ‘disappointed or damaged’ by local churches was noted as another area of success and challenge. For one Trustee, i-church had to be created on the Internet simply ‘because that's where people are’ - a line that could have been a direct quote from the writings of Richard Thomas.

i-church had taught the diocese a great deal, the bishop observed, helping Oxford to stay ‘ahead of the curve’ of Christian innovation. Reliance on existing structures had been a strength and a weakness: ‘we just kind of took the models we were familiar with and tried to rethink them’, but ‘something we had totally failed to grasp was the nature of the internet’, particularly that ‘online and diocese do not sit well together’, divided by the increased speed of communication and relationship fostered by the Internet. At the same time, the Anglican emphasis on good structure and clear accountability ensured visitors to i-church knew that the details behind the vision had been worked out, that someone was responsible for what took

place, and that the site would be stable, safe and long-lasting. ‘I don't think we know where this journey is taking us’, he later observed, and flexibility was vital in engagement with an ever-changing medium.

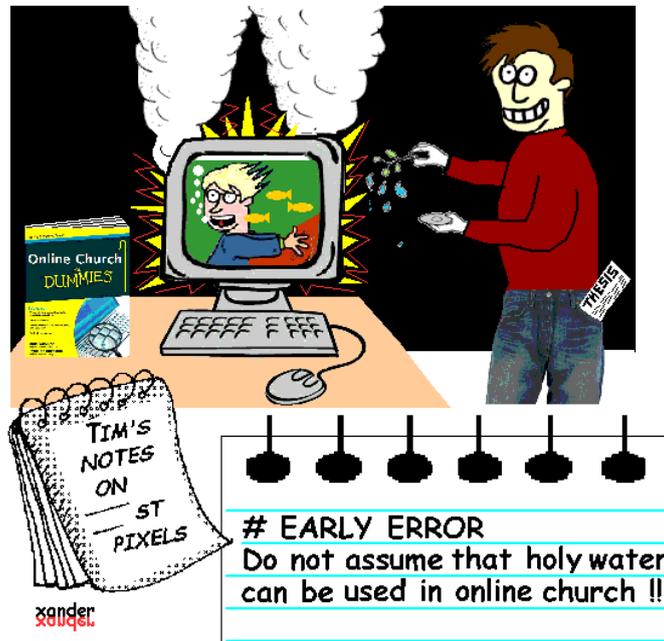
Overall, however, the Trustees insisted that the experiment of i-church continued to succeed. ‘Some of the richness of what’s come out of i-church has exceeded my expectations’, one observed. Another praised the ‘absolute focus on prayer’ – ‘the support is amazing’, she claimed, creating a ‘solid’ foundation for the community. The bishop concurred; for him, i-church had become a space ‘where people pray together and communicate at depths not often seen in parish churches’.

These comments can all be supported from the observations and reports presented in this chapter. The relationships and prayer life of i-church does indeed matter a great deal to participants. i-church has attracted members who had previously left their local churches and might otherwise not have returned to Christian community. The bishop’s comments about the challenge of meshing website with diocese are perceptive, and supported by my research; building an online church as part of an established religious institution slowed the pace of adaptation, giving ultimate responsibility to leaders who could not commit to daily participation online, but also offered a solid foundation of authority, experience and finance.

If we return to the seven themes identified in my previous chapter, we can see that i-church and Church of Fools differ significantly on several counts. i-church did not attract a congregation of thousands, and found the high levels of initial interest disorienting. It did form something like a community, however, with strong bonds, firm commitment and a sense of belonging. Moving spiritual experiences are reported, but relatively few worship in the chatroom; prayer is more significant in community life than worship services. Once again, the majority of members attend local churches, or did so in the past – but there are clear indications that many committed members don’t think of i-church as a “real church” at all, something not recorded in Church of Fools. Familiarity is extremely important, but i-church relies on the familiar more for its structures and procedures than its visual style. Internal control is quite different, with very few trouble-makers or “trolls” and a much more

discursive, participatory leadership style, structured around a diocese-appointed, salaried pastor. Oversight, finally, is again quite different: where Church of Fools received funding without restrictions, i-church is actually part of a diocese, a wider organisation that takes ultimate responsibility for the church and can intervene as required. Considerable financial resources were invested, but went almost entirely to support a particular model of salaried leadership rather than on innovative web design. We see here a church that has emerged from negotiations between online, diocesan and parish cultures, appealing primarily to current and former church-goers, not to users of the Internet, and the those dynamics have generated a community quite unlike any other I have studied.

CHAPTER THREE: ST PIXELS



- *Myself, "Xanderised".*

Church of Fools has moved between four different locations since 2004, changing its name and shifting three times between different constellations of media. The community can now be found at StPixels.com, a website launched in 2006 offering forums, blogs and a chatroom. Some participants first met in the 3D church; most, like myself, arrived much later. St Pixels is a quite different kind of space from the 3D church, offering a rich community, a wide range of communication channels and regular offline gatherings. It seems more harmonious and stable, and considerably less anarchic. There is great diversity here, but that diversity is almost entirely Christian; there is no Atheist's Corner, no vending machine cult and no swarm of hostile clones of Ned Flanders. If my chapter on Church of Fools described an experimental project bursting into life, we see here a church that has had time to gather strength, experience and maturity. It remains, of course, the mature branch of that same root; as the cartoon above demonstrates, humour and satire are still warmly applauded as an essential part of local culture.

This chapter begins with the development of St Pixels from 2004 to 2006, but focuses primarily on the present day. I discuss site design, avatars, leadership, discussion, blogs, worship and play, all introduced by a case study of a meet in 2009.

FROM VIRTUAL WORLD TO ST PIXELS

The 3D environment attracted media attention, many visitors and a loyal core community. When it closed in September 2004 the church moved briefly to a new setting hosted on the Ship, a set of forums and a text-only chatroom shared with that community. Two church members active at the time suggested the experience of existing as a church had developed a quite different culture, dedicated to support and collaborative leadership rather than aggressive debate and strict moderation. Recombining the communities quickly became untenable, and the leaderships acknowledged the need to separate again.

Reopening the 3D church as a multi-user worship space would require financial resources that were not available and development work that could not yet be undertaken. A website was created instead, churchoffools.com, offering forums, private messages and a chatroom, ostensibly while work was under way on the creation of a new 3D space.

Some of those who endured these moves experienced great disappointment and loss, as described in my chapter above, but this was also a time of adaptation. The new text environment – nicknamed “flat church” by one of my interviewees – developed the interaction range of the group in several significant ways.

First, discussion forums were created, named “the Crypt” in reference to the social area of the 3D environment. Other forums shared prayers and praise reports, celebrated community birthdays and played wordgames. Games were an important part of the Ship of

Fools, and were transferred to a “Bouncy Castle” forum on the new site by regulars familiar with that community’s customs.

Another new development was the appearance of text-based chatroom worship, an unexpected membership initiative that leaders quickly adopted and structured into a regular schedule. Text worship retained elements of the 3D worship style, particularly liturgical responses, spontaneous prayer and the simultaneous recitation of the Lord’s Prayer in different forms.

The new church also needed new leadership. The heady, exhausting days of waves of visitors and mass attacks had now ended, and leadership could shift to gentle encouragement of good behaviour and subtler definitions of acceptable conduct, led by newly-appointed “Hosts”. Mark Howe was involved in leadership throughout this period, and his dissertation highlights some of the tensions shaping the community. The Ship of Fools’ “Ten Commandments” had been applied in modified form through the 3D months, but “each new problem seemed to demand an extension to the list of proscribed behaviour” until “the whole system started to feel pharisaical”²⁷⁶. Instead a basic set of key communication virtues was drawn up, and in deference to those who insisted that on clear, practical rules the document “intersperses generic values with a “gloss” of specific applications.”²⁷⁷

These Values emphasised behaviour over doctrine, leaving the community as inclusive and open as possible. Christian references were initially very brief:

Church of Fools is a Christian church. You are welcome to join us, whatever your beliefs, though you should expect the organised activities to have a Christian emphasis.

²⁷⁶Mark Howe, "Toward a Theology of Virtual Christian Community" (MTh dissertation, Spurgeon's College, 2005). p52

²⁷⁷ Ibid. p53

As Howe points out, “[t]he advantage and drawback of this approach was that it enabled each reader to use their own working definition of Christian and church”²⁷⁸. This discursive approach to doctrine was typical for Church of Fools, but offered no theological foundation for behaviour rules. A later, more elaborate statement emphasised respect, tolerance and diversity:

God is revealed to seekers by many different means, including creation, the Bible, the life of Jesus and the Spirit-filled witness of the Church. Church of Fools is one expression of that historical, international and universal Church. We aim to create sacred space on the Internet where we can seek God together, enjoy each other's company and reflect God's love for the world. Those of any belief or none are welcome to take part in our activities, providing they accept the Christian focus of our community and respect other participants.²⁷⁹

This statement offers a positive presentation of Christian teaching without excluding any shade of Christian belief and practice. It does not specify valid forms or interpretations of revelation, and foregrounds social activity. Sacred space encompasses all church activities, including fellowship.

As the community matured, other channels of interaction began to appear. Some were arranged through the church website, like the annual “Secret Santa” exchange of small presents by post. My first gift arrived from California: a stuffed reindeer, a bag of chocolate and a miniature red armchair just like the image I had chosen for my avatar. Other channels emerged unofficially, like email, MSN conversations, telephone calls and face-to-face meetings. The Church of Fools never organised a meet in the few months of its 3D existence, but such encounters proliferated over time, far more so than in any other church studied.

²⁷⁸ Ibid. p53

²⁷⁹ ‘St Pixels: Our Core Values’, http://www.stpixels.com/view_page.cgi?page=discover-core. Accessed 10-01-10.

A new website was launched in May 2006. St Pixels, “Church of the Internet”, operates through software designed by community members (particularly Mark Howe). Forums now include images and themed sections, and members can create profiles and write their own blogs; private messages can still be sent. New avatars offer adjustable faces and outfits. A new chatroom features visual and audio capabilities designed for worship. The new site gained a steady stream of local and national coverage, including three major BBC broadcasts: the community has hosted Radio 4’s Sunday Worship and featured twice on Sunday morning religious television.

WORSHIP AT THE MORLEY MEET, 2009

Life in St Pixels will be introduced through one specific event, a worship service conducted during the 2009 Morley Meet. We find here key themes of St Pixels culture intensified and made visible, introducing concepts and issues central to this chapter. For clarity, I italicise descriptive sections to separate them from accompanying analysis.

On 20th February, 2009, 43 members of St Pixels gathered at the Morley retreat centre in Derbyshire. For five years, the centre manager – a member since the first days of Church of Fools – had invited churchgoers (sometimes known as Pixies, a term not all members approve of) to spend a weekend socialising, playing games and worshipping together. At 8pm each day guests assembled from their conversations, country walks and croquet to join the St Pixels chatroom for worship.

Morley has featured in media coverage, welcoming a BBC television film crew to the 2008 meet to film the St Pixels community, and the manager agreed that anonymising the centre here would be unnecessary.

On the 20th I counted 13 laptops, with other churchgoers connecting from PCs in the office, watching over shoulders, or following the service on a large projector screen.

This abundance of personal computing equipment may be taken as evidence both of socioeconomic status – it is surely significant that almost one in three of those attending could purchase and bring a portable computer, in addition to the cost of travel and accommodation for the weekend – and of changes in cost and familiarity over time. On my first visit, services were held around office computers.

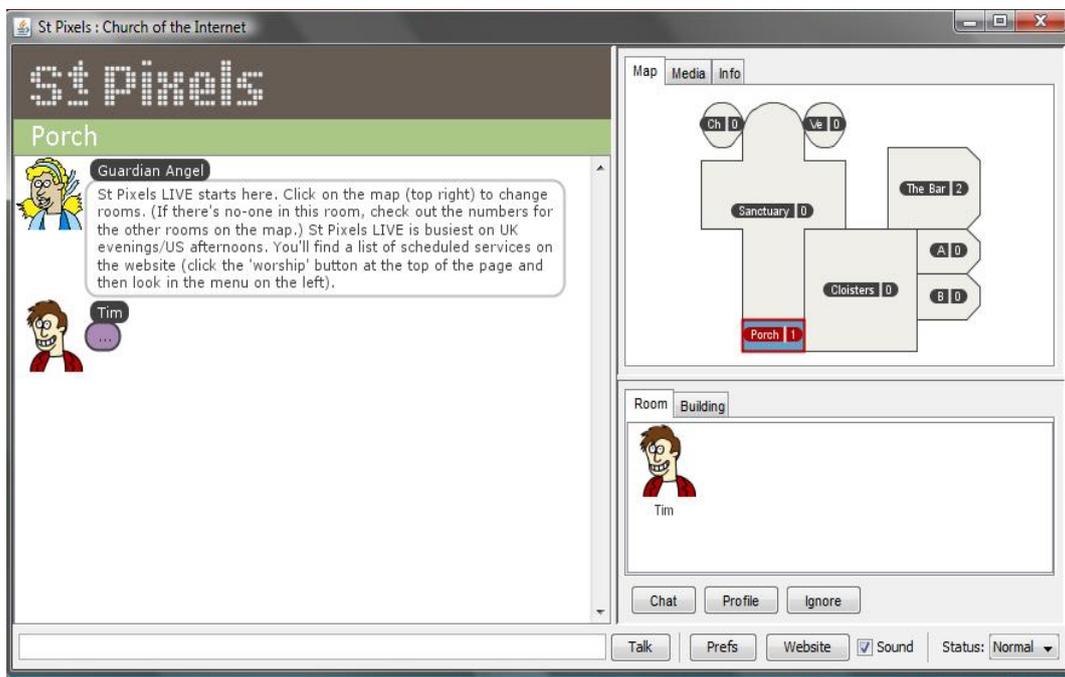
The Morley laptops were joined in the chatroom Porch by another 21 people from around the world. Of this group of 34, 24 were women and 10 men. Avatars selected by these participants indicated that all were white. Light-hearted conversation flowed between individuals around Morley through speech and text, with those unable to access a computer of their own calling out contributions for others to type. The chance to communicate between the gathering and the larger community was a common topic – “It’s great to have Morley + non-Morley peeps together :-)” – along with questions about who had arrived, who was misbehaving, and what the gathered members had been doing. “Morley accentuates my ‘maverick’ streak!! :-)”, one woman declared. I had started recording field notes, and this was reported with good humour: “O Lord tim has got his pen and paper out” – “nooo!”.

I consistently found community members willing to tolerate and support my research with patience and amusement, and this evening was no exception.

I did not consider taking notes during worship services in the Morley chapels, reflecting a felt distinction between online and offline settings. Community members often attend worship online while pursuing other activities, such as speaking or operating different browser windows, but in face-to-face worship these same members perform an embodied display of full attention. Attending meets offers an unusual chance to see how these Internet users actually behave with their computers during online conversation and worship, and throughout the events described in this section people were conversing, walking around and

commenting on the contributions appearing on their screens. The only exception – as noted below – was the attentive silence that fell during times of prayer within the service.

The St Pixels LIVE chatroom was designed by Mark Howe like the groundplan of a medieval church, with a few concessions to humour and functionality (Figure 1). Visitors log in to the “Porch”, and can then move to other rooms, including “the Sanctuary” – a cross-shaped space with an apse, like the design of the 3D Church of Fools – a chapel, meeting rooms, “Cloisters” and a “Bar”. User gender can’t be gleaned directly from usernames, which may or may not convey any gendered associations. Gender is signalled instead through the selection of male or female avatars. Those on the 20th were divided roughly 2:1 between females and males, a ratio I found on almost every visit to LIVE. These avatars ornament all posts, in LIVE and on the boards, and are gathered in one space in the LIVE window to clearly indicate who is logged on.



The avatar shows a head and shoulders, invariably smiling, with a selection of clothing and accessories such as a cigarette or pipe; the avatar design process is discussed in Part Four. One accessory, a halo, conveys a particular significance: it marks a “Host”, a kind

of moderator with a general mandate to promote a welcoming and positive atmosphere. Exclusions are possible, but rare.

A few minutes before 9pm, a peal of church bells rings out. The sound can be heard in any area of the chatroom, letting everyone know that worship is about to start, and was recorded from the parish church at Morley. A single deep bell sounds at 9pm, summoning members to the “Sanctuary”.

The oldest member of St Pixels, extremely popular and well-respected, was well-known for the pleasure he took in this bell. According to members who spent time with him in LIVE, he would log in to say goodnight and type ‘it tolls for me’ when the bell rang. I will call him “Ben”. Following his death in 2008 the sound was named after him, and as the bell rang several of those present in the chatroom typed his name:

‘Ben bell’, ‘Ben’s bell’.

The worship leader on this occasion attends a local church and sits on the Parochial Church Council,²⁸⁰ but is not ordained. Like many in St Pixels, leading worship is a new role for her. LIVE is specially designed to facilitate the role of the worship leader, who operates a separate private window where he or she can upload images and texts, post them to the Sanctuary, and cue sounds. The image above shows the division of the LIVE window into segments, with the map at the top right tabbed for “media” and “info”; switching from map to media allows the user to view any images currently displayed. The worship leader’s avatar appears behind a wooden pulpit in a separate section at the top of the chat space. This function helps to keep the service intelligible, separating the leader’s words from congregation prayers or responses. A third feature of the software further enhances the leader’s role, allowing the leader to upload and stream audio recordings; on this occasion, the worship leader followed the usual St Pixels custom of dividing recordings between different

²⁸⁰ See previous chapter for definition.

individuals, with a brief homily delivered in person but Bible readings recited by others. Audio streaming is commonly maintained alongside text, with the words of the Bible verse, homily or hymn posted up in time with the sound.

Hosts also have their own software powers. Each can operate a separate window in LIVE displaying the registration date and IP address of all users present in the chatroom, offering options to suspend or ban any user from the space. Surveying this information carefully helps detect anyone trying to log back in from the same computer under a new name.

The service on the 20th lasted just under three quarters of an hour, ending at 9:40, and included hymns, responses, prayers, Bible readings and a homily. The first hymn is heard in silence among those gathered together in Morley – but not, apparently, by some of those joining the service from around the world. ‘singing :)’, one woman typed. Lyrics are posted by the worship leader, line by line, and some respond by repeating particular phrases. As the hymn played, images appear on the media screen: candles, an X-ray of a hand, figures praying. The first hymn is followed by responses, posted by the leader in capital letters to indicate sections for the congregation to repeat:

LORD, SEARCH ME

GUIDE ME

LEAD ME

HOLD ME

EACH AND EVERY DAY

AMEN

Next comes a Bible reading from the book of Ecclesiastes, illustrated with an image of a Bible text magnified through a pair of glasses – a photograph taken at Morley during a previous meet, like the image of candles used during the first hymn and the recorded bells.

These images and sounds are created by the community themselves, a feature of worship significant for two reasons. First, we see here one example of the importance of the Morley meet as a focal point for community life. Hosting worship from Morley, using images photographed at Morley and heralding each service with the recording of the Morley bells are practices that connect every LIVE service, throughout the year, to this time of physical gathering. Second, this showcasing of creativity is one example of the importance of various forms of craft-making within the community. Blogs are regularly used to share photographs and discuss crafting hobbies, and a small number of members are well-known in the community for their creation of cartoons. This chapter opens with one particularly elaborate example, created for this thesis by a member called “Xander” – he has signed his work, so in this one case I have not disguised his username. Xander creates many cartoons from the avatars of community members, and sells these in various formats to raise money for St Pixels. Each avatar may itself be considered a craft object, as a form of self-representation and self-expression. LIVE worship is another space where community creativity is expressed, regularly using photographs or cartoons created by community members. The choice of worship leaders also demonstrates this encouragement of creativity, as the role is often taken by lay Christians seeking to explore and develop gifts in homily-writing and prayer.

During the second hymn, more people post responses: ‘Fantastic tenor line to this’, ‘good job no one can hear my singing :)’, ‘singing the alto at home :-), ‘the Lord can hear each one of us singing as a choir :-)’. One woman sitting near me begins to sing, and others join in or hum the tune. Keystrokes are used by two of the self-confessed singers to signal movement, /o/ or \o/, indicating arms swaying or raised to heaven. The singer beside me is greeted by the sudden appearance of a separate small window on her netbook screen bearing the words, ‘love the singing!’ – another participant had chosen to operate the ‘private conversation’ function.

Note here both the familiarity that some members show with Christian culture, remembering song lyrics, tunes and harmonies, and the involvement of the physical body in online worship through singing.

Further responses introduce a ten-minute homily, reflecting on the passage from Ecclesiastes to demonstrate the importance for Christians of involvement in politics and social justice. The homily opens with an image described as ‘dog poo’, prompting cries of ‘eugh!’ from the congregation, and uses this as an example of the kind of issue people care about in their local communities. Images of the UN debate chamber, clouds, rainfall and a cake decorated with Pixels avatars – baked by a member and brought to another Morley meet – all develop the theme of commitment and generous giving as an inescapable part of the Christian life. Some share their appreciation as the homily unfolded – ‘Amen’, ‘good words’ – and repeat their thanks as the homily concluded: ‘thank you xxx [...] you really spoke to me’. One of those watching explained to me the following day, in an interview, that this homily had ‘really knocked my socks off’, ‘really really worked for me, that sermon, that service, that day’.

A new worship leader takes over after the homily and more music follows, introduced with encouragement to ‘sing together’ and accompanied by affirmations that the scattered participants were joining in: ‘singing the alto’, ‘all singing here!’. The service ends with a series of prayers, some composed by the new leader, some spontaneous interjections by participants, and finally a shared recital of the Lord’s Prayer. These spontaneous prayers, following customary St Pixels practice, consist overwhelmingly of the posting of names of individuals known to the contributors and flow for many minutes and scores of contributions. The Lord’s Prayer, following a custom from the first Church of Fools, was typed by all participants simultaneously in a myriad different versions and languages. The service to this point had been conducted amid a gentle to-and-fro of conversation, spoken, typed and sent through private conversation channels, but the times of prayer were marked by complete cessation of off-topic communication; those without computers called out names for others to type on their behalf, and other conversation was silenced with murmurs of ‘shh’, ‘no talking’.

Prayer was marked out within the service as a time of particular sacredness, as shown by the shifts in body language and informal behaviour rules. This distinction emerged again when I asked on another occasion for a complete transcript of chatroom activity during a

service. I had hoped to analyse this for evidence of conversation patterns before and after services and to look more closely at these times of prayer, which move too swiftly for accurate observation – simply counting the number of prayers shared, for example, is a great challenge. The St Pixels Management were only prepared to grant a partial form of this request: a transcript could be shared with me, but only if a team member first deleted all individual prayers from the record. Even though these prayers were almost exclusively names without further detail, I had already seen them while attending the service in person, and I promised not to quote them directly, sharing a text record of this part of the service was seen as a violation of community trust.

The service ended at 9:40 with another round of appreciative thanks, but – unlike the movement from Porch to Sanctuary that began the service – participants make no attempt to move to another room. Posting thanks signals the closure of the time of worship, and those logged in embark on conversations and welcome newcomers who had arrived after the service had finished. Participants slowly drift from the Sanctuary room to “The Bar” over the remainder of the evening, creating separate groups conversing in these two different rooms. Those at Morley prove reluctant to relinquish their laptops, leading one computer-less individual to ask ‘Would it be more sociable if we went and got our machines?’ – prompting laughter around the room. Online, conversation attends to the life of the community, discussing controversial recent blogs. An American member protests at the difficulty of organising face-to-face gatherings in the United States, where users live further apart, and asks if someone could organise a “phone meet”. A host walks over and sits down beside me: ‘Are you taking notes on this inane conversation?’

Key themes can be observed in this service and the social interaction that surrounds it. LIVE shows some of the ways in which technology can be designed to facilitate worship and worship designed to suit technology. Various patterns of multi-channel, multi-media communication are important, with members conversing simultaneously through the chatroom, private chat windows and speech, each channel used to pass comment on the others. The shift in mood and focus that occurred across channels during times of prayer indicates the importance of prayer within these services, suggesting also the spiritual significance of electronic worship and indeed the sincerity of a congregation that often prides

itself on frivolity. This last point leads on to another crucial theme, the ubiquitous interweaving of sincerity and humour, a characteristic trait tracing back to the origins of Church of Fools in the Ship. The high value placed on forms of craft-making has been mentioned already. Finally, this description demonstrates the complex but significant relationship between key periods of face-to-face gathering and the wider online community. These themes will be pursued further through the chapter, underlying our analysis of the design, discussions, blogs and sociable conversation that characterise the rich community life of the St Pixels website.

The wide range of media practices pursued among and around the St Pixels community can be summarised under a number of headings: site design, leadership, worship, discussion, blogging, socialising and off-site communication. Users themselves are also of interest, and St Pixels' own membership surveys offer useful data regarding demographics, motivations and perceptions. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn.

STPIXELS.COM: THE WEBSITE

St Pixels is a public-access website, open for all visitors to read. The site is divided into seven sections, accessible from a horizontal menu bar running across the top of each page: Discover, Interact, Blog, Discuss, Reflect, Worship and Support Us. The homepage offers a general introduction to the site on the left-hand side, highlighted content in the centre, and links to the registered user's profile, messages and uploaded content on the right. Highlighted content is selected from the site by the leadership teams, and may include site news, members' news, or particularly interesting threads and blogs. Each individual section follows the same pattern, linking to a section homepage with introduction and highlights. Discussion threads may be selected from a complete list or a "view hot topics" link specific to each section, from a "New" button listing all recent forum posts, or from "My threads", a button listing the threads to which the viewer has contributed.

The seven sections are colour coded in a range of pastel shades, with a background theme of white and grey-purple, and each deals with a different area of site activity. “Discover” offers information about the site, including Core Values, FAQs, a list of media coverage and a statement regarding acceptable research methodology for would-be students. “Interact” is described as ‘the heart of the St Pixels community’, and contains a wide range of conversation threads, including word games, information about face-to-face meets and a section for ‘support with various challenging situations’ entitled “Stand by me”. All members can compose their own blogs in the “Blog” section; some are introduced by more or less recognisable photographs of their authors. Discussion threads are divided between “Discuss”, to which anyone can contribute a topic, and “Reflect”, used for occasional concentrated discussions of themes selected by the site management. “Worship” includes information about worship services and LIVE events, prayer and praise report threads, discussions about spirituality and sections relating to social justice. “Support Us”, finally, includes information about site finances, how to donate, and occasional money-raising ventures.

The boundaries between these site areas are closely guarded by Hosts. The site’s Core Values include a series of “implications”, one of which reminds readers – under the heading of “Constructive Dialogue” – that they should ‘Be aware that different parts of the site are intended for different types of interaction’. This close defining of purposes and topics is particularly marked between “Discuss” and “Blog”, with blog posts considered particularly controversial regularly relocated as discussion threads.

Separate software must be downloaded to access LIVE, a client that runs the chatroom directly from the desktop. Unregistered visitors to LIVE can log in as “guests”, selecting a standard male or female avatar and a randomly-generated name composed of a letter from the phonetic alphabet and a string of numbers (for example, Delta#2525).

The most recent user survey, in February/March 2008, received 113 responses. Almost 80% were aged 30-59, with the highest proportion, 34%, aged 50-59. Under-18s were not permitted to join. 71% came from the UK and 19% from the USA. 40% were male, 60% female. Both age and location statistics showed less variation than in 2007, with considerably

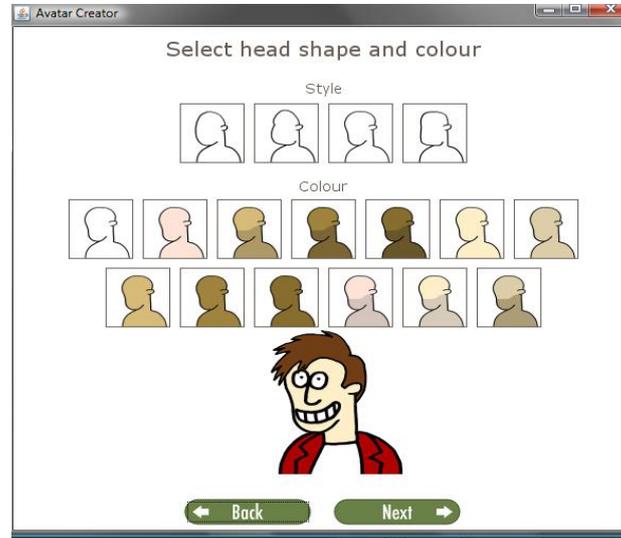
more members in the UK than before (63%), but the gender ratio was unchanged. Only one quarter had first heard of St Pixels from Church of Fools, down from half the previous year; most had encountered St Pixels through media coverage, but an almost unchanged 14% from word of mouth. About 78% attended church once per month or more, and 15% did so ‘occasionally’; compare this with Church of Fools, which claimed 39% of visitors did not attend a local church. A multiple-choice list of “spiritual” affiliations found over 60% ‘Protestant’ and just over 10% ‘Catholic’, but other figures were much more evenly-matched. Slightly over 40% were ‘evangelical’, slightly under 40% ‘liberal’, and around 30% ‘charismatic’ and ‘traditional’. Non-Christian categories received only one or two responses each.

AVATARS AND USERNAMES

Posting requires registration, including selecting a username and a password, but new members only need an avatar when they first visit the LIVE chatroom. Once created, this avatar appears alongside all posts made to the site. The avatar can be changed at any time, but usernames are fixed and registering more than one is strictly forbidden.

The image below shows the second stage of the avatar design process, following selection of gender. The avatar is chosen through a series of layers, selecting head shape, then skin tone, hairstyle, eyes-and-nose, mouth, and clothing. Different ranges are available for male or female avatars, often including strong gender markers. Males can select a skin tone indicating an unshaven face, for example, while the mouths of female avatars were originally limited to a range of full red or pink lips. This latter decision proved particularly unpopular and female avatars were eventually allowed to adopt the no-lip styles shown here. Clothing also bears gender markers. Male choices include a jacket, a shirt and tie, a T-shirt, and a football shirt in three different strips; female choices are all conservative, with covered shoulders, and include the jacket and T-shirt but also outfits with bead necklaces or lacy collars. These design options structure appearance along a tightly-restricted range of possibilities and were markedly more popular with male than female members – possibly a

result of allowing a male leader, Simon Jenkins of Ship of Fools, to design the range of appearance options without community feedback.



Even the simplest avatars can become objects of emotional investment and identification, hotly defended against external interference. In the forum days of Church of Fools, church leadership decided to “upgrade” the available images without consultation and were startled to find themselves embroiled in a rebellion that later became known as the “avatar wars”. Mark Howe reports ‘complaints of "who stole my avatar?"’, and explains that ‘few of us [the leadership team] expected the sustained anger on the part of some users who had been deprived of *their* avatar. One user complained that without her avatar she could no longer be herself and no longer be a full part of the community.’²⁸¹ William, one of those most angered by the decision, recalled in our interview that he had lost something he had personally identified with. For the leaders, these images were insignificant – Howe described them as ‘poorly-drawn’ and ‘the size of a postage stamp’ – but clearly for some users they represented something highly significant, symbols of community membership and personal identity. According to Howe, it was here that the church leadership ‘came to realise just how intense virtual community can become.’

²⁸¹ Howe, "Toward a Theology of Virtual Christian Community". p37

The new user must also choose a username. In Church of Fools – both 3D and “flat church” – registered members usually selected usernames quite different from their real names. This tendency is common across the Internet, but not always accepted in online churches. i-church, for example, insists on some variant of the real name (such as first name and surname, or first name and first initial of surname). Toward the end of the life of churchoffools.com a number of regular members – including myself – took advantage of a temporary offer by the leadership team to change our usernames to versions of our real names, and use of real names remains popular in St Pixels. From my own point of view, using my real name online represented a greater transparency, a firmer connection between my online and offline selves, building on the confidence I had by then developed in the safety of the online environment and my own competence at navigating it without mishap.

St Pixels members I interviewed selected usernames primarily for simplicity or personal significance, considering the effect of the name on others only as a secondary concern. Where an effect was desired, this was framed in terms of implying an interesting personality or preserving continuity across sites. When I asked Chris why he had selected his username he responded ‘Oh, I’ve had that for ages’, long before St Pixels, and explained that he hoped people he had met on those sites would be able to recognise him. Harriet invented a new word for her username by combining parts of the names of her two cats and liked the outcome – ‘my name is spiky like me’. Her concern for privacy was echoed by another user, Beth, who adopted a character from a book as her username because she was ‘very computer illiterate’ when she registered and ‘very afraid’ to reveal her real identity. Finally, one user who adopted a flower for her username, Carol, suggested that her online choice had influenced her real-life perceptions: ‘I look at [that flower] differently now [...] its just part of this huge joke that makes St Pixels work’. Very few members choose usernames with explicit religious connotations.

No usernames refer to official positions – Reverend, Father, etc. This reflects a policy dating back to Church of Fools, explained as follows on the St Pixels website: ‘Clerical roles from elsewhere and academic, theological or ministerial qualifications do not confer authority or status on a member of St Pixels. For this reason we do not allow ministerial titles in the

screen names of registered users.²⁸² The difficulty of proving the validity of claimed qualifications is also significant, but the site justifies the ban in terms of equality.

As this discussion has shown, interpretation of avatars and usernames must attend to issues of identification, pseudonymity and expression. In designing a profile a user seeks to create something that they can recognise as their own, that maintains a preferred degree of distance or transparency between their online and offline activity, and that others will respond to in a desired manner.

Distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable forms of pseudonymity occupy an important place in the rules and ethical standards of all the churches studied in this thesis. Each permits some degree of acceptable dissimulation or concealment, through channels recognised as such by all members, but forbids any form of communication deliberately intended to deceive. Boundaries of appropriate conduct vary from church to church, but the basic distinction is consistent. We see here one example of the role of cultural competence in online interaction: the user requires some degree of awareness of the kind of relationships people form with their avatars before forming any picture of the person behind that image, and failing to recognise the range of pseudonymity accepted within a specific community could lead to misunderstanding or censure.

The diversity of perceptions of appropriate pseudonymity can be seen in the contrast between “sockpuppets” and “alts”. St Pixels bans registering more than one username, or “sockpuppeting”. The congregation of the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life, on the other hand, includes a number of individuals with two or more avatars or “alts”. In St Pixels, every profile is treated as the online form of a unique individual; in Second Life, users aware of local cultural norms should at least acknowledge the possibility that different avatars they encounter may be operated by the same person. An alt can be accepted as part of a culturally valid attempt to explore a new identity or to make a new set of friends, but neither motive can justify identity play in St Pixels. Users are expected to be transparent, and identity is much

²⁸² ‘St Pixels Core Values’, http://www.stpixels.com/view_page.cgi?page=discover-core. Accessed 10-01-10.

more tightly rooted in conformity to offline reality. A forum sockpuppet could represent a refusal to accept this kind of identity, an attempt to evade the penalties of past misdeeds by disguising the user's identity from moderators, or a ruse to buoy up the plausibility of a deception by registering new accounts on behalf of "friends" or "relatives" who can support the user's story. All three forms have been cited by moderators as justification for banning the offending puppeteer.

My own avatar can be viewed in the images above and resembles my physical appearance in shape, skin tone, hairstyle and clothing as closely as the software permits. Conversation with other St Pixels members, and attendance at meets, shows that this attitude is far from uncommon but not universal. Frank, for example, explained in our telephone interview that his avatar was 'pretty close' to real life, with a pony tail hairstyle, and noted that the limited range of options meant his avatar had to smoke a cigarette rather than the cigars he normally preferred. The avatar was 'about as close as I could get', the product of a lot of time spent with the design software looking for a 'caricature based on reality' – 'I don't really try to hide who I am'. William reported that he habitually changed the colour of his avatar's clothing to match the shirt he was wearing that day, freely admitting that this was 'a bit silly'. At the opposite end of the scale, Harriet was the most privacy-conscious interviewee. She was highly aware of her anonymity and committed to safeguarding it, and continued this preference into her avatar design. Harriet expressed the least confidence in agreeing to an interview, querying my research at length beforehand and insisting we speak through an instant messenger text program to avoid sharing phone numbers. In fact, the interview was a great success; Harriet was capable of expressing herself fluently and quickly through typed text, and answered my questions informatively and at length. When I asked if her avatar resembled her physical appearance, she responded 'no!!! [...] i do not have grey hair' and explained that this was part of her protection of privacy: 'avatar is not like me – anon!'.

In my own case, I was twice startled by unexpected divergences between avatars and realities. First, I found that a sizeable minority of users selected avatars with dark skin tones and interpreted this as evidence that the St Pixels community included a degree of ethnic diversity. I subsequently learned that the community was overwhelmingly white, but that

some members varied their skin tone according to the season – using dark skin and sunglasses to indicate a suntan, the arrival of summer or return from a tropical holiday. Second, I was surprised at a meet to encounter a number of women my own age, despite my belief for several years that I was almost the only member under 30. The avatar designs available to women had all signalled, to me, middle-aged or senior identities, particularly through the choice of hair and clothing; this was a limitation unintentionally created by the (middle-aged male) designer, not an intentional choice by community members. Both cultural and software influences are relevant to online appearance and, through appearance, to perceptions of identity.

THE LEADERSHIP

The 3D Church of Fools developed a multi-tier structure of leadership: a Management Team appointed by Ship of Fools, Wardens appointed to undertake moderation duties, and worship leaders. This three-fold, appointment-based structure continued in the text-based Church of Fools and in St Pixels, but shifted in its range of duties and has expanded to include far larger numbers of individuals. At the time of my first draft of this chapter, June 2009, the management team consisted of seven people and the second tier, the Hosts, was separated into seven groups, one for each site area. As the website explained, ‘The site is divided into streams - areas which deal with a different aspects of the community's life. Each stream is run by a team of hosts and coordinated by a member of the management team’.²⁸³ There were 10 hosts in total, in addition to these 7 coordinators, and members of the Management frequently served in more than one stream. The worship stream included both a hosting group and a team of no fewer than 32 worship leaders, whose role will be discussed further below. As noted above in the discussion of worship at Morley, hosts wear a halo in LIVE to mark them out; elsewhere on the site, their avatars show no distinguishing features.

²⁸³ ‘Who runs St Pixels?’, http://www.stpixels.com/view_page.cgi?page=discover-tour-staff. Accessed 10-07-09.

The hosts for each stream have three major tasks: encouragement, content management and moderation. Content management occurs particularly in the Discuss area, where any discussion threads must be submitted for approval before they are posted to the website. Hosts discuss the submission, edit it if necessary to clarify the question asked, and attach an image to illustrate the theme. Discussions may take a day to be approved and are less frequently started than in Church of Fools, but aim to be more tightly focused, more interesting and more visually appealing and tend to attract a far higher number of responses.

The task of ‘encouragement’ was expressed by several LIVE hosts I interviewed, and fits most closely with the implications of the title of “host”: to welcome guests into a safe and rewarding environment. For Bella, for example, hosting means ‘you’re inviting people into your space’ and making sure they’re treated well, but ‘very seldom’ stepping in to moderate. ‘Encouragement’ and ‘moderation’ are clearly best seen as different points on a continuum, involving different combinations of informal posting and formal reprimands. One host reported that these different positions had to be argued out among the leadership from time to time, between those who favoured leading by example and those who preferred to enforce clearly-stated rules.

Moderation, operating through the posting of explicitly-signalled “Hosting” statements, is managed according to the set of Core Values introduced in Part One. As of mid-2009 these values are listed as “Respect”, “Tolerance and Diversity”, “Constructive Dialogue”, “Leadership” and “Legal Compliance”.²⁸⁴ As noted above, each includes a positive definition and a series of “implications”. Under “Respect”, for example, we read:

You have a right to your opinions. You do not have to reveal more of yourself than you wish. You can decide if and when you want to end any conversation or discussion. You should not become the victim of aggressive behaviour. Please treat other users with the same respect, remembering that there is a real person behind each screen name and each online identity.

²⁸⁴ ‘St Pixels Core Values’

Under Constructive Dialogue:

We believe that exchanging opinions and experiences can help each of us to learn about God, others and ourselves. We therefore do everything possible to cultivate a climate on the site that is conducive to such exchanges.

Implications of these values include, under “Respect”, such rules as ‘Do not deliberately mislead others or play identity games, as this can be disturbing for others and undermines trust’, ‘Do not launch personal attacks on other users’ and ‘Do not use aggressive language, including gratuitous swearing’. The value of “Constructive Dialogue” directs readers to ‘Expect your beliefs and assumptions to be challenged, and consider unpacking them in order to help others understand you better’. In other words, any opinion may be expressed, regardless of theology, so long as the poster is willing to encounter disagreement; any disagreement may be expressed, so long as the poster refrains from personal attack.

A new official category, the Mediators, was created in late 2007. Mediators are completely independent of the leadership system, offering a chance for members to take any complaints to a neutral body. Unlike all other St Pixels posts the mediators are appointed by democratic vote among members. Two serve at any one time, and members with any kind of grievance are instructed first to seek a private conversation with the other party, then to take their objections to the Management Team, and only then, if necessary – including if a grievance is held against hosts and management – to contact mediators as a last resort. This policy is explained in both theological and practical terms, as illustrated in this concluding summary: ‘In all of this, remember to be quick to listen and slow to speak. Other views exist. Human beings are sitting at the other end of the Internet connection. We are people of the grace story.’²⁸⁵

Another new position was announced in 2009, marking the creation of St Pixels as a limited company. ‘Legally’, the site announcement admits, ‘we’ve been in a bit of a no-man’s

²⁸⁵ ‘Mediation: When Good Communities Go Bad’, http://www.stpixels.com/view_page.cgi?page=discover-mediation. Accessed 10-01-10.

land, without any formal structure. The Management Team and the Hosts have given freely of their time, but there's been a bit of a vacuum behind them about who is ultimately responsible.²⁸⁶ The Management Team would now be renamed the Community Leadership Team, and ultimate responsibility passed to the 8 members of a Board of Directors. In future directors will be elected, with all community members who choose to become members of the Company eligible to vote. This structural change is intended to 'protect the people running St Pixels against being personally liable if anything goes wrong: and it gives the people we deal with confidence that we're a regular organisation with a common legal structure.'²⁸⁷

DISCUSSION

The general theme of “discussion” covers two of the site streams, “Discuss” and “Reflect”. “Reflect” is used only rarely, for themed discussions organised by the site leadership. In 2006 a discussion of *Mission-shaped Church* amassed several threads on each of the seven chapters of the report. Two well-known Christian figures, Brian McLaren and Steve Croft, contributed articles and McLaren agreed to answer a series of questions from the community. In 2007 and 2008, Reflect threads were used to discuss aspects of membership surveys organised by the leadership, and a solitary thread from running from 2008 to 2009 discussed the place of the Bible in the St Pixels community, amassing 252 replies. These are the only four themed conversations Reflect has featured, but each became a major focus of attention for the months in which it remained active.

“Discuss” is a much more active region, dedicated to community conversations. I recorded a screenshot in March 2009 of the previous month’s activity in Discuss, and from mid-February to mid-March contributions had been made to 31 threads. Repeating this

²⁸⁶ ‘What is St Pixels Ltd?’. http://www.stpixels.com/view_page.cgi?page=discover-ltd-announce. Accessed 10-01-10.

²⁸⁷ ‘FAQ about St Pixels Ltd’, http://www.stpixels.com/view_page.cgi?page=discover-ltd-faqs. Accessed 10-01-10.

survey in mid-June of the same year, contributions had been made to 16. Activity in this area fluctuates, but continues to attract considerable community attention.

There are seven sub-forums within Discuss: “Church Life”, “Everyday Life”, “Current Events”, “Culture”, “Opinion”, used for longer opinion pieces submitted by members, “Talk Theology” and “That Book” – the Bible. These titles offer indications about the site community, particularly the expectation of churchgoing experience conveyed by “Church Life” and the emphasis on real experience alongside more abstract theology. The somewhat ambivalent reference to the Bible is also noteworthy. The introductory paragraph to “That Book” emphasises the community values of respect, diversity and constructive dialogue: ‘Here is where we can study the Bible together and discuss what it means to us. [...] Through these discussions you can share your interpretation of a passage or read about someone else's take.’ The focus here is on sharing interpretations and personal meanings, rather than teaching or learning, and no privileged authority is given to any particular version of Christian doctrine, in keeping with the community themes of tolerance and diversity. At the same time, the implied assumption here that readers will have a personal interpretation of the Bible to share further underlines the church experience expected of community members. There may be new Christians or non-Christians reading these pages, but none of the Discuss areas make an explicit attempt to educate, attract or engage such viewers.

My interviews with members suggested that many viewed the Discuss areas with mixed feelings. Evan, for example, explained that he visits Discuss ‘a lot’, reads postings by others he considered intelligent and well-educated, and learns a great deal, but also noted that his own comments were ignored and ‘pretty much snuffed out’. Indeed, his ideas were usually voiced by others and ‘dissected and destroyed’ before he got around to posting at all, and he reported that he would typically hold back from a thread if one particular member had already contributed – ‘he’s a really smart man’. Discuss is ‘more in your face’ than other areas of the site, Evan explained, but this was one of its good qualities – ‘I like that’. We see here a member negotiating a particularly dangerous part of the site, where a misstep could lead to public belittling or worse. He does so by paying attention to which ideas have been covered and who has commented on them, judging the weight of contributions according to understandings of the intellectual reputations of different posters. Such an approach would be

invisible to a content analysis of actual postings and indicates the degree to which a relatively small number of major contributors can influence the thoughts and behaviour of a much wider community of unseen readers.

This deference to perceived intellectual prowess was not universally shared by my interviewees. Beth explained that she used to read every discussion, but now 'it all seems so technical', 'beyond me' in complexity and focused on 'education and not people's experiences'. She now scans discussions instead, looking for particular posters that 'I always read'. These favoured posters were 'not theologians, not educated in a formal way in the Bible'. One, for example, was 'so calm', 'calm and fair' in everything she wrote, and another was praised for being 'so irreverent and off the wall', 'I think she's very different from how I think I am'. Like Evan, Beth now prefers to read rather than write, but she follows a carefully-worked out practice of skim-reading based on her understanding of the reputations of different posters and is much less admiring of combative display.

This negotiation process can change over time, as posters gain confidence and experience or lose interest and patience. Angela usually logged in to St Pixels over her breakfast porridge to survey the night's postings, considering her responses through the day. 'I found the discussion area very interesting' at first, she explained, 'because I'd pretty much never thought theology, I thought faith'. She wasn't shy, she explained, but 'academically fragile' and particularly sensitive to being 'shot down' in debate, and she struggled at first to join in with such a 'challenging and difficult' environment. Over time, however, she 'gradually became tougher', and now 'I join in with the big boys and girls'. Discuss had been 'a learning experience for me', and part of that learning concerned her own intellectual confidence. While Angela highlighted her interest in 'other points of view' she also pointed out that she 'wouldn't say that any of them have changed my mind about anything'; where her views had shifted, this was more a gradual process of starting trains of thought and following them over time.

One common motivation for participation in discussion is perceived lack of any such opportunity at home or in the local church. For Sandy, Discuss was a chance to express

herself in new and exciting ways. She ‘was basically in Discuss most of the time’ when she first joined the site, ‘several times a day’. ‘It was like a big valve opened up’, a chance to release ‘thoughts that hadn’t been expressed for years.’ Discuss offered space for ‘intellectual activity that I craved’ after years of caring for small children, ‘like an audience for it, in a way’. Where Angela gained confidence over time to post more, Sandy eventually moved on to other kinds of community activity, explaining that ‘I don’t have that need so much any more.’ For Daniel, the need for escape came from a church that refused to countenance the range of ideas he was beginning to find interesting. Part of a conservative evangelical church, he began asking complex and provocative questions about the Bible and Christian doctrine. ‘There was a need for me to probe these things’, he recalled, but to do so openly could cause trouble at church. Instead, he started to join online forums, concealing his name to protect his privacy. Over time he moved away from his theological conservatism, using the Internet as a resource to help think through his new ideas. ‘I don’t think it [the Internet] triggered it, but it put alternatives and options at your fingertips’.

One final comment on the experience of Discuss reflects a much rarer but still highly influential point of view: the desire to save St Pixels from its theological and spiritual inadequacies. A small number of posters can be highly influential in driving the direction, tone and perceived value of discussions for a much larger number of occasional contributors and silent readers, and a small but voluble number of posters can give a minority viewpoint a high public profile. Vaughan is perhaps the most notorious example of this group, and one of the members I specifically invited to participate in my interviews. Vaughan has engaged in theological debate online for more than ten years, moving between text and voice chatrooms and forums in search of interesting conversations and spaces to make a difference. He enjoyed ‘the cut and thrust’ of argument, and particularly wanted ‘to reach out to those people who are in cults’, making something of a personal project of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. St Pixels offers just one more way ‘of getting alongside people’ to see how they think and engage them in debate. ‘I personally think there are many on there, I wouldn’t like to put a percentage on it, who are religious but don’t know Him.’ ‘Don’t get me wrong’, he explained, ‘I pray for them, I do care about them [...] I’m trying to reach out to these people’. St Pixels members reacted with particularly telling disdain to the Bible, he suggested, becoming extremely uncomfortable with the messages he brought them and accusing him of simply pressing his own personal opinions. Others sent private messages to say they agreed

with him, supported his views, but didn't feel 'strong enough' to join in. In sharp contrast to some of the community members introduced above, Vaughan's extensive experience of online debate made the attempts of St Pixels members to shoot down his arguments seem 'pretty tame in comparison', 'water off a duck's back'. Indeed, he admitted, his willingness for confrontation could be a weakness – he might feel more empathy for someone he could visibly see was nervous, but be much less sensitive online.

BLOGS

Every registered member of St Pixels can write their own blog, claiming a section of the site to host an archive of their entries. Each blog displays the avatar image of its author above the list of entries, and bloggers can also choose to upload an image or photograph. Blog entries are open to comments for 30 days, and the website includes pages listing the most recent updates. As in the Discuss section, the stream hosts can select particularly interesting entries to highlight on their section homepage.

St Pixels discourages bloggers from posting controversial positions, moving such posts to Discuss threads where they can be more freely debated. One motivation was a desire to promote open debate:

Blogspace is still personal space; a place to share with a space for other members to comment, share their own experience, offer support or whatever. What it should not become is a place to post opinions on controversial subjects, because you won't be challenged and we are officially discouraging that sort of blog.²⁸⁸

We can gain some sense of the popularity of blogging from statistics published by St Pixels. In the 2007 user survey, 27% of the 56 respondents composed a blog post more than

²⁸⁸ 'Changes to blog hosting', http://www.stpixels.com/view_page.cgi?page=discover-blogchanges. Accessed 10-01-10.

once a month and 59% commented on the blogs of others. In 2008, 34% of 113 respondents blogged and 54% commented. In the 30 days of postings I analysed in detail, running from the 11th February 2009 to 11th March, 76 different users posted at least one entry, 28% of the 276 members who logged in. These statistics all suggest that around one third of active members write blogs, while considerably more – over half in both user surveys – read and comment on them.

These 76 bloggers posted 262 entries between them. The most active blogged daily, creating 30 entries. 4 members posted between 10 and 20 times, 12 5-9 times, 25 2-4 times, and 34 posted only once. The least frequent bloggers were often still regular contributors, posting one or two entries each month over long periods of time. The success of the blog section as a space for bloggers to gain readers and responses, and for readers to find interesting material, both supports and is supported by this large number of infrequent contributors. Because so many people contribute a small number of entries apiece, the section thrives; because the section is thriving, anyone who posts an entry can be almost assured of gaining an audience and a few comments.

I conducted a thematic analysis of the 262 entries, coding each into one or more categories as appropriate. A small but varied range of themes emerged from the coding: “diary” entries, mentions of church attendance, statements of faith, artworks, web links and references to current affairs.

164 of the 262 entries recorded over the 30 days, from 62 of the 76 bloggers, were “diary” postings. These entries can be roughly designated “upbeat/neutral” or “downbeat” according to their tone. Attempting to distinguish between upbeat and neutral postings proved hopelessly subjective, but entries marked by explicit unhappiness with the events or experiences recorded were much easier to identify. According to these definitions, 115 posts by 54 bloggers were upbeat/neutral and 49 posts by 27 bloggers were “downbeat”. St Pixels can function as a support group and a safe space to describe unhappy experiences, but this is by no means a universal or predominant activity.

Another major theme, coded for 51 posts by 25 bloggers, concerned involvement in a local church. These were also subdivided according to tone. “Downbeat” entries critical of churchgoing experiences accounted for 16 entries, a third, contributed by 6 bloggers. St Pixels blogs can be used to criticise the limitations and frustrations of local churches, but very few choose to do so; instead, a significant number of bloggers choose instead to talk openly and positively about their experiences.

Religious references can be roughly divided into two categories, here termed “theology” and “faith life”. “Theology” refers to entries that outline a doctrinal position, and “faith life” includes prayer requests, accounts of devotional practices and references to the author’s perceptions of God at work in their lives. 17 posts by 9 authors were coded as “theology”, usually dealing with the Bible, and 57 posts by 32 authors were coded as “faith life”. This represents only a small fraction of the total number of blogs posted, but at least some bloggers did consider faith an important motive for their writing. Angela, for example, posted to a Reflect thread discussing the merits and purpose of keeping a blog at St Pixels: ‘I did keep a journal once - but the difference is in the interaction - I LOVE the comments and prayers - the comments help me to think more clearly and the prayers are just wonderful.’

Interviews indicated that faith also played an important role for some blog readers. April mentioned praying over what she read, and Beth spoke of her particular love of certain bloggers who she felt were ‘strong Christians’. Vaughan’s personal faith led him to be highly critical of some postings, objecting to blogs that ‘disappoint me’ by asking questions ‘you wouldn’t expect a Christian to ask’, such as whether people needed to be saved.

10 bloggers used 19 entries to post “creative” material, including their paintings, needlework, poems, music and stories. These blogs were relatively few in number, but the work reflected in these postings could be described as “high-impact”, well-known around the St Pixels community and referred to by members at meetings and in online conversations. Interviews spoke about these creative posts with great warmth. Several mentioned a blogger who posted a series of lengthy fantasy stories about the social and religious lives of a family of toy “trolls” she owned, and other posters were also praised for imaginative, funny and entertaining contributions. Several interviewees mentioned photographs: for Beth, images

from other countries around the world gave her a new opportunity to see landscapes she had never visited and people she had never met.

The most prolific poster did not fit into any of these categories. Liam blogged a daily hymn verse, without comment, and accounted for 30 of the 98 non-diary postings. The practice of blogging hymn verses was first adopted by Ben, the elderly man we encountered earlier in this chapter. Liam took up the practice after Ben's death, as a tribute to his memory and an ongoing service to the community. One interviewee described Ben's postings as 'a little encouraging nugget to begin the day', 'a mini-devotional', and many commented warmly on their enthusiasm for this St Pixels tradition.

One final category received only one entry in this 30-day period: the "goodbye" post. Members of online communities sometimes choose to mark their departure with one last post, outlining everything that's wrong with the community or its leadership, bidding farewell to favoured friends, and vowing never to return. This combination of elements can be adjusted to display the resigning author in a favourable, even heroic, light, as one able to operate as a sociable, well-liked and well-adjusted community member but driven out by forces beyond their control. February's departee was a good example, using his blog to blast the site for its inadequacies, bidding fond farewell to friends and vowing never to return. An impressive 63 comments included pleas to remain, good wishes for the future, supportive or cynical analyses of the motivations of such a post, and arguments about the merits of the original complaint. The blogger in question swiftly retracted his resignation, citing the numerous favourable comments as the factor that changed his mind.

Interviews with St Pixels members included discussion of favourite blogs, motives for blogging and benefits for readers and authors. Warm appreciation of "diary" postings was particularly common. Carol liked 'the ones that are about people's lives.' Patricia, the blogs coordinator, explained that she would 'rather read about someone's personal life than a theological discussion'. Her favourite blog on the site was 'creative' and truthful, 'telling a good story', and 'really makes you feel you're part of [the blogger's] life'. Beth admitted that 'I have a little difficulty with the blogs that seem to be begging people to comment on them',

saying ‘tell me I’m OK, tell me I’m doing the right thing’, but also recalled some such blogs as among her favourites – ‘I felt like [one blogger] needed support and I felt like just by reading them I was supporting [her]’. For Aaron, one poster to the “Reflect” thread on blogging, ‘Blogs give members the opportunity to share parts of their lives, their joys, sorrows, worries, mountain top experiences or depth of the valley times. [...] other members in their turn are given the opportunity to respond, offer support, a word of congratulation or share a laugh. In simple terms, to share in the lives of others as people do off line.’

Carol was one of many to suggest that blogging helped strengthen bonds between writers and readers. Blogging gives ‘insights into people’, she explained, ‘it helps you build up relationships’. April suggested that blogging had helped her understand those she liked least among the community, describing such blogs as the ‘opening of a room, opening a mind’. In the Reflect thread, Aaron wrote ‘I think [blogs] help us get to know each other as individuals, and make relationships less virtual.’ In the same thread, Barnaby argued ‘Blogs are one of the biggest builder of community we have, along with the chats we have in St Pixels LIVE’; the chatroom is immediate, but ‘Blogs give the opportunity to give more depth to the thoughts. Emotion can be expressed better here, more joy, more love, but also more frustration at a personal situation, and more anger in a rant.’

As we have seen, blogging can offer a highly-valued source of insight into the lives of others, and – through writing, reading and commenting – a way to share in one another’s experiences and build relationships. There are also a range of more personal motivations, highlighted in interviews and in the Reflect thread. The act of writing down one’s experiences and thoughts can be therapeutic and formative, helping come to terms with events or clarify thinking, and these benefits were cited in a number of interviews. One member’s post to the Reflect thread expresses both particularly well:

It's a great opportunity to be able to explore different ideas and stages in my life/spiritual journey. It also encourages me to write about what is on my heart. I feel like I am climbing into Ronnie Corbetts chair and talking - whether anyone listens or not - it doesn't really matter. [...]

Why do I blog??? Something gets in my mind and starts to niggle. [...] Writing a blog helps me to clarify my thoughts and emotions. I was feeling quite down, when I wrote one, but by committing it to type and being more focussed I was able to see things were by no means as bad as I felt they were.

On the other hand writing about my Mum enabled me to face things that I had really buried, and to acknowledge the huge gulf between where she was and where she is now, and to allow some of the grief to reach the surface.

WORSHIP

The 2007 and 2008 user surveys indicated a high but changeable level of involvement in the Worship areas, with the proportion of members posting at least monthly to the prayer, praise and support threads decreasing from 71% to 61% from 2007 to 2008 but the proportion attending services in LIVE increasing dramatically from 59% to 73%.

Themed forums are one of the oldest forms of spiritual practice in St Pixels, dating back to the text-based Church of Fools website. The core threads, then as now, are entitled “Members Prayer” and “Members Praise” and offer space to post brief prayer requests, reports of positive experiences and events, and responses. Checking these threads on 20th June 2009, the Praise thread has received 578 posts since May 18th 2007, averaging three posts every four days. Posts are clustered, as one might expect, with a praise report posted every few days receiving a rush of quick responses. The Prayer thread is far more active, receiving 430 posts since April 13 2009, just under six and a half per day. Postings deal particularly with friends and family, both in the St Pixels community and outside it, and may include names or initials to identify those to be prayed for. Postings tend to be brief, and may deal with health, work issues and other personal difficulties.

Prayer and praise threads are liberally embellished with a range of small images offered in the site software. These usually show circular faces in various colours, smiling,

frowning, hugging, cheering, or displaying any of a range of other static or animated expressions – 😊, 🙏, etc – and these are found throughout the praise thread. In prayer, one particularly important image appears: not a face, but a small flickering candle. This simple candle image, 🕯️, is posted again and again throughout the thread, featuring in almost every post and often appearing with only a name or in lieu of any text at all – a silent votive candle, signalling a prayerful response to whatever has gone before. The enormous popularity of this image could derive from prior experience of churches, where the lighting of candles as markers of prayers is a very common practice.

Other forums established in “Worship” are focused on education or sharing experience. “Meditation and Sharing” includes posts about requesting help from God, experiences of healing, or desires for the future, largely without commenting on other entries. In other sections, visitors may post images of things that have inspired them to worship, or read and comment on a string of brief articles describing different styles of Christian prayer. A network of “prayer partners” has been established to connect members into more private and intimate relationships of prayer, and while no statistics are available regarding the number of participants it appears that some at least have taken part.

The Worship section also includes a number of blogs, entitled “Spiritual Journeys”. Bloggers can be invited to contribute such a journey in addition to their own private blog, and five have done so to date, each accompanied by a separate thread for comments. Another Journey has been contributed by a US Army Chaplain serving in Iraq. These journey blogs describe the life experiences of the bloggers in terms of their understanding of God and God’s work in their lives, and can be raw, emotional and intensely personal.

The final form of website worship practice to be discussed here is the monthly Social Justice Prayer Focus. Starting in October 2008, a theme has been selected each month, introduced by a brief article, discussed, and taken by the community as a focus for prayer. Themes have ranged from worker safety and religious freedom to the plight of refugees and access to clean water. Most recently, a “Water Aid Project” developed these prayers into a more concrete form of assistance, aiming to raise money for a water-related charity by

auctioning off gifts and artistic creations donated by community members. Members contributed books they had written, blankets they had knitted and their own artworks, as well as ornaments, souvenirs and other prizes, and raised £1000.

The “Worship” section also contains information relating to the daily services of worship held in the LIVE chatroom. One example was described at the start of this chapter, but St Pixels worship can follow a very wide range of patterns. Services are shared between 30 worship leaders, each with great freedom to develop their own independent styles. The full calendar includes a daily service at 2100 GMT, silent prayer weekdays at 0845 and 2045, a mid-afternoon service four days per week, the Jesus Prayer at 0730 Mondays, the Rosary 0800 Wednesdays, a 2100 CDT (Central Daylight Time) service for American members on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Weekly Bible studies are sometimes added to this list, making a total of 26 events in a week. Silent prayer is perhaps the most surprising addition to the schedule, an event for which people log on to their computers twice daily to do nothing at all for 15 minutes. The appeal of such an action clearly reflects the sense of space, shared presence, and shared focus that is experienced in the LIVE worship space: being logged in to the same chatroom at the same time as others creates an atmosphere of prayer even without any posting activity designed to foster such an atmosphere.

The basic structure of the main daily service, at 9pm GMT, includes a homily, hymns, responses, and scripted or spontaneous prayers. These are all elements that would be familiar to regular churchgoers, particularly from the Anglican or Methodist traditions. Colin commented on this in our interview, describing church worship as ‘remarkably ... deplorably traditional’. He accounted for this formulaic style in three ways: church software offered a limited range of creative options; congregations were predominantly composed of people who either attended a local church or had done so in the past; and the use of a standard pattern for worship helped leaders to put services together quickly and efficiently. A radical and innovative worship style might be well suited to congregations who had never attended a church before, but the St Pixels community are almost all familiar with traditional styles of church worship and able to understand, appreciate and benefit from a traditional format. In a setting where participants can log in and out at any time without warning, an immediately comprehensible worship style is a clear advantage. Bella, one of the worship leaders,

suggested two other relevant factors: the traditional church backgrounds of the worship leaders themselves, who naturally created worship patterns that suited their own ‘comfort zones’, and copyright restrictions affecting the range of music that can be played.

Almost all interviewees who attended worship services reported their experiences with warm enthusiasm. ‘Online worship absolutely works for me’, Angela said, and Bella’s praise for the Morley service described above has already been recorded. Bella spoke of LIVE worship as a ‘forced time window of half an hour’ to focus on God, a ‘God-shaped space’ she rarely found in her busy schedule. Rose described worship as ‘an extension of her personal prayer life’, and Tina too was enthusiastic about the power of online prayer: ‘I find the prayer times to be pretty powerful’, ‘I’ve felt the Holy Spirit there’. ‘I’m not a great pray-er’, she added, ‘but I’ve been really touched by all those different kinds of prayer in St Pixels’.

Some reported less favourably. For Liam, ‘whether I get anything out of the service depends on the service – some of them are excellent and some of them are appalling’. He objected most to those that used ‘churchy language and pious phrases’ instead of the Scriptures, and commented that ‘St Pixels is far too introspective in the services, far too spiritual... devotional rather than anything else’, focusing on personal prayer to the exclusion of any reference to current affairs and the problems of the world. Three interviewees described themselves as dechurched and non-Christian, and they all disliked St Pixels worship. One described the style as ‘arid’, and another explained that ‘I just can’t connect with it, it’s not my thing, it just doesn’t do anything for me’. The third objected that St Pixels services were ‘just the same as going to church’, with ‘hymns and prayers and someone saying something’, and ‘not something I enjoy at all’.

PLAY, CONVERSATION AND FRIENDSHIP

We have already discussed three major motivations for St Pixels membership: discussion, sharing lives through blogging, and prayer. A fourth could be summarised as

“fun”. We have seen the importance of play and humour throughout this chapter, and this section will focus on some of the specific forms of play shared at St Pixels. The theme of social entertainment, finding pleasure in interaction, relates to perhaps the most important motivation for St Pixels membership, friendship, and this section will also outline some of the major channels for communication between friends within and outside the website.

The main focus for playful interaction in St Pixels is the “Bouncy Castle”, a forum dedicated to wordgames and light-hearted conversation. Participants compose limericks, poems, jokes, ask questions of Frank, a designated expert who promises ‘a completely inappropriate solution’ to any dilemma, or participate in organised sweepstakes to guess the results of upcoming sports games and award ceremonies. These competitions often include small prizes, sent out by mail to the winners. The exchange of post between members is a long-running tradition, first introduced for “Secret Santa” events in which participants are asked to send a small Christmas present to a randomly-selected recipient. Around 50 participants took part in the 2008 gift exchange, contributing to a 417-post thread volunteering to join in, expressing excitement and anticipation, and eventually describing, praising and posting photographs of the gifts received.

The 2008 user survey gathered some surprising data regarding the popularity of the Bouncy Castle. Only around one quarter of respondents contributed once a month or more, down from almost half the previous year. Colin followed up the survey by posting statistics drawn directly from the website, and reported that over the three months from October 2008 to the start of January the Bouncy Castle had received almost 5000 posts, far higher than Discuss, Worship or Reflect. He reminds me in his review of this chapter that most Castle posts may be only a few words or characters long, but since those posts are usually contributions to word games those few characters may represent considerable commitment of time and thought. These postings came from 93 different contributors, compared with 113 for Worship and 88 for Discuss, and 35 were contributing at least weekly – but over one quarter of postings came from one individual and almost 90% from only ten, much higher figures than for other site areas.

Playfulness extends far beyond this dedicated forum, appearing in the selection of usernames, the cartoon style of avatars, and even the name of the site itself. According to Carol, the role of humour is ‘incredibly important’, both as ‘part of life’ and as a ‘coping strategy’ to help express and deal with negative experiences. For Frank, play was ‘definitely a prominent part of St Pixels’ and one important way for Christians to show that ‘God gave us a sense of humour’. His ‘expertise’ thread gave him great pleasure – ‘I laugh my tail off whenever I go on’ – and added ‘a little bit of levity’ to the site. Interestingly, Frank suggested that the site was ‘if anything too serious’ now, a view expressed by several of the longest-standing members of the community in conversations and interviews. The emphasis on play, foolishness and the expression of genuine Christian spirituality through irreverence can be traced back through Church of Fools to the Ship, but some sensed a gradual shift over time away from this atmosphere towards an increasingly ‘church-like’ solemnity.

Much light-hearted conversation occurs in the chatroom. LIVE frequently takes up hours of participants’ time, and was the primary form of St Pixels interaction for some interviewees. Services were usually followed by long hours of conversation, as shown in the description of the Morley gathering at the start of this chapter. Harriet took this observation further than most, claiming in our MSN interview that ‘i almost live at st p it seems – there till 4:30 am this morning :-)', but her intense commitment – and the freedom it gave her to move anonymously beyond her offline social commitments and restrictions – were echoed by many others.

The 2007 and 2008 surveys showed an almost unchanged degree of involvement in LIVE, with around three-quarters of respondents participating more than once per month, and many of those I interviewed spoke very warmly of its importance. April suggested that chatroom conversation helped participants get to know one another better than any other online medium: it ‘makes the friendships more real’, she explained, ‘it’s like I’m almost shaking their hand’. For Carol, LIVE conversation helped her ‘get to know people in a completely different way’, where ‘you get into deeper relationships much more quickly’ without distractions of physical appearance. St Pixels was so important to her, she explained, ‘because I can open the window, and there is communication. It’s opening a door on a different world’. This value derived partly from reading blogs and discussion threads, but

also from long conversations in LIVE. These friendships gained value not only from time and honesty but also, in some cases, from supportiveness and spiritual assistance. Ursula described one occasion when her children were upset and she logged in to LIVE to find friends to pray with her. ‘The response I have to say was fantastic... Let’s face it, would you call your vicar at 11 o’clock? Probably not.’

Friendships extend beyond St Pixels through a wide range of other channels. In the 2008 survey, 44% of respondents had used instant messaging at least once in the past year to communicate with another member, 58% had sent an email, and 29% had made a telephone call. These represent considerable shifts from 2007, where the survey reported figures of 32%, 58% and 39% respectively; messaging had risen in popularity, while email and the telephone had declined. It would be interesting to pursue these shifts further and investigate the factors influencing them, but clearly multi-channel relationships are common.

Social network sites are not covered in the survey, but Facebook in particular has become very important for community life. Facebook offers each registered member a profile, friends lists, space to post photographs and status updates, and a newsfeed showing recent updates to the accounts of friends; users can send messages, start instant messaging conversations, join groups and add applications to their profile pages. Certain wordgame applications became extremely popular among St Pixels members, who challenged one another to endless competitions. Several members registered for Facebook specifically to join these conversations, designing profiles under their St Pixels usernames and avatar photographs and avoiding any information that could identify them offline. This negotiation of the social network site enables them to join the space and communicate with friends, without giving up their control over the presentation of their identity or mixing online and offline social worlds. These examples are interesting, but rare; over 120 members of St Pixels have joined Pixels groups on Facebook, and only the smallest minority took such careful action. For most, connecting St Pixels friends into their wider social networks, managed under their real name and photograph, was apparently quite unproblematic.

The most striking shift between the 2007 and 2008 surveys was in the percentage of respondents who had attended a meet, gathering face-to-face in a setting like the Morley retreat centre. The proportion who organised their own informal meetings declined slightly, from 39% to 32%, but attendance at organised meets rocketed from 36% to 78%. 21 organised meets were advertised on the St Pixels website over 2008, and 10 in the first six months of 2009. All but one of these meets occurred in the UK, either in England or in Scotland, aided by the relatively small distances for travel. American members face a greater challenge, but some have flown great distances to visit one another, travelled across the Atlantic to Morley, or organised meetings to coincide with other travel plans. Another option for American members is the “phone meet”, gathering participants for a conference call, and several such calls have been arranged. According to the discussion thread dedicated to the most recent of these, 17 callers joined in.

The main annual meet since 2005 has been the gathering at Morley. The 2009 gathering was discussed, planned and celebrated in a 400-post thread, including photographs, updates during the meet, fond memories after the meet ended, and assurances that each member had arrived home safely. Members unable to attend contacted the gathering by telephone or computer, and these were passed around from hand to hand to let the caller speak with as many people as possible. On one occasion, a laptop was carried all over the house to let a distant member see each participant through a webcam. On previous meets, packages of sweets, pictures and handmade gifts were posted from America to be left on the pillow of every guest. Those unable to attend demanded a toast be announced for absent friends, and those who took part faithfully took photographs and reported this back to the website community.

At the meet itself, visitors addressed one another by their usernames, each wearing a laminated badge showing their avatar and username to ensure that no one’s online identity was forgotten. Some members brought partners and children, and if these had not already signed up to St Pixels – which several had – they were awarded honorary names, avatars and badges. Two members brought cakes, including one magnificently decorated with avatars made of icing to celebrate a birthday – the second year that such a church-themed cake had been constructed. This cake was incorporated into worship, as noted in Part Two. Continuing

the connections between online and offline interaction, each room in the retreat centre was named to represent one of the areas of LIVE and cartoon was designed to ornament each door – invariably a scandalous depiction of St Pixels members misbehaving. I include one example, “The Bar”, below with the artist’s permission. Most of the weekend was left empty for informal conversations, cups of tea, countryside walks, playing of instruments and games, but worship services punctuated each day and offered a wide range of more or less formal Eucharists, prayer services and times of singing. A sing-through of Handel’s Messiah was arranged, drawing on the experiences of many with church choirs, and a Taize service was held one evening.



“The Bar”: image designed for a door sign at the Morley Meet, 2009.

Speaking to those who had attended meets, I found almost all said they were not surprised by the people they had met. Irene found it ‘remarkable’ how well she had known people before meeting them. Some had surprised her with respect to age or looks, but most had been ‘just like their avatars’. For Patricia, online conversation allowed her to get to know people as they really are, without the distraction of appearance; people are ‘pretty open to bare their souls’ online, building extremely strong friendships on the basis of this honesty and openness, and when she came to meet those people she found they were ‘very much like their online personalities’. That said, respondents also frequently suggested that meeting face-to-face gave more complete understanding. Ursula suggested that meeting ‘helps fill in the picture’. She considered St Pixels a space where she could be ‘thoughtful, flippant, stupid, all the things I am in real life’, but ‘I filter it a bit’ to appear nicer – ‘I don’t think the true bitch fiend from hell comes out there’. Others suggested that meeting face-to-face gave reassurance

that people truly were as they appeared to be, strengthened existing relationships, and changed subsequent online conversations by adding extra nuance, an accurate mental picture of a person's appearance and voice and a range of shared experiences.

CONCLUSION

If we return to the seven themes identified in my discussion of Church of Fools, we see that St Pixels has developed new answers to some and retained the same approach to others. St Pixels continues to demonstrate that online religion can appeal on a large scale, albeit to a community of scores and hundreds rather than a swarm of thousands and tens of thousands. Its community is much more stable, richer in its range of synchronous and asynchronous media, more firmly interconnected through social network sites, email, MSN and face-to-face gatherings, and continues to inspire long-term engagement and sacrificial commitment. Interviews and observations showed that worship continues to move and inspire.

St Pixels seems to have consolidated its appeal to those already committed to Christian communities, but lost some of the diversity once displayed by Church of Fools. The curious and sometimes hostile visitors to that experimental space have largely evaporated, and only a few self-described non-Christians can still be found. Of the 113 respondents to the 2008 community survey, 69% said they considered St Pixels an adequate replacement for local church-going – but only 7% never attended a local church.

Familiarity remains just as crucial, if not more so. Worship is based on traditional liturgical forms, in a chatroom designed to look like a liturgical space. Some of the logic has shifted, however: instead of trying to reassure those who know very little about churchgoing, a familiar style is now favoured because it seems natural to those who know a great deal, and because such a format can easily be put together by untrained worship leaders. Forums, chat, blogs and social network sites have all gained importance; these are familiar forms from other kinds of online activity, not necessarily from local churches. Each has been appropriated by

St Pixels to support a diverse, community-based Christian ethos, not necessarily as adopted elsewhere online.

The issue of control became less significant with the cessation of large-scale trouble-making, but the church has retained its independence and consolidated administrative authority in a Management Team directly involved with daily church life, able to make swift decisions and prepared to delegate widely. Theological justification for this particular model has not yet been required, partly no doubt because leadership claims no spiritual authority.

Running costs are far lower than for Church of Fools or i-church, and most design work is carried out in-house. Members have proven willing to donate what finances are required. Should some kind of graphical environment be created in future, a goal that Mark Howe and others are still trying to achieve, it is likely to rely where possible on low-cost, in-house software.

We see here an ongoing negotiation between different social, technological, demographic and theological factors influencing community growth. There is no simple progression in online religion toward better engagement with the “potential” of the Internet, as many early commentators predicted, nor is that “potential” as clear to see as some assumed. Church of Fools, i-church and St Pixels are three quite different kinds of online church, each connected in a different way with major Christian institutions, favouring different sorts of activity and creating a community of a different size, but all succeeding in generating experiences that members consider spiritual, relationships they consider significant, and a deep sense of belonging. The next two chapters will open out this range, introducing two further forms of online church with their own distinctive responses to the challenges and opportunities of online religion.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE ANGLICAN CATHEDRAL OF SECOND LIFE



Epiphany Island, left; my avatar, right.

The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life sits in Gothic splendour atop a sunlit hill, dominating a small island in a virtual ocean. Visitors come in many forms, from tattooed centaurs to respectable middle-aged ladies, and every day of the week some gathering will come together for casual conversation, organised discussion, private prayer or corporate worship. This chapter will indicate some of the outlines of the culture of this Anglican isle, introducing the “virtual world” of Second Life, the research methods used to approach it, the vision behind the creation of the Cathedral and the main activities and practices that shape life on Epiphany. Particular attention will be paid to three important topics, worship, architecture and the avatar, and the chapter will conclude with attention to the motivations guiding visitors to the island.

As we shall see, Second Life religion shows some unique features not encountered in Church of Fools, i-church or St Pixels, and many more with which we are already familiar. The Cathedral has been shaped by a unique set of personalities, contexts, opportunities and challenges, and demonstrates the great diversity to be found in the world of online religion, but we see here also the persistence of some key themes, principles, tendencies and problems.

INTRODUCING SECOND LIFE

Second Life was first opened to the public in 2003, and encouraged users to build a world of their own with 3D graphics, animation, sound and text. This creative freedom attracted great media publicity, covering the first real estate millionaire, the virtual activities of a string of real-world corporations and universities, reports of “Second Life addiction” and a series of sex scandals. Registered members quickly ran into the millions.

Registered members, of course, may not be active and those members who log in may do so rarely. Linden Labs currently releases regular statistics regarding the total number of “user hours” logged in-world, the peak number of concurrent users, land owned and transactions conducted – all much better guides to actual in-world activity. In the last quarter of 2008, 112 million “user hours” were logged, with a simultaneous peak of 76 000; these users owned 1.76 billion square metres of land, and “spent more than \$100 million USD on virtual goods and services”.²⁸⁹

A range of standard shapes - “primitives”, or “prims” - form the basic building blocks of creativity and can be tweaked, combined and decorated with “textures” created by the designer. With patience and skill, these tools can be used to construct complex and elegant objects, from trees and flowers, houses and cars to clothing, hair and jewellery. The designer of an item can sell it to others or give it away, and stores, markets and “freebie” boxes abound throughout the world.

Visitors to Second Life must create an avatar, and while most start out human and bland it is commonplace (indeed, expected) that serious users will soon acquire a more creative body, skin, hairstyle and wardrobe. These avatars tend to be human, but need not be

²⁸⁹ Zee Linden, “Second Life Residents logged nearly 400 million hours in 2008, growing 61% over 2007”. 15-01 2009. <http://blog.secondlife.com/2009/01/15/q42008/#more-3487>. Accessed 10-01-10.

so; animals are common, as are mythical creatures, robots, and anything else that can be dreamed up by a skilled designer. The basic avatar can perform a range of movements, including flight, but more complex actions can be designed and sold for private use or fixed into the surrounding environment as “pose balls”. Seats offer “pose balls” with a selection of postures, while nightclubs offer ranges of dances. A more extravagant user can invest in land, for a private home, store, club, garden, or whatever else appeals – a source of income, or a gathering space for friends and visitors. A search function can be used to hunt for people, groups, places, classified ads, land sales and events, and also displays a regularly-updated showcase of impressive spaces chosen by the world's managers.

Aside from this creativity, consumption and display, the most important activity of Second Life is communication. Avatars can gather together and communicate through typed text or voice, and friends can add one another to a contact list. Private messages can be sent to anyone in-world, and this contact list helps make that personal communication easier. Groups can be created to help communicate with large numbers of people at once, often to publicise times and locations of upcoming events. The name of one group can hover above the avatar, another opportunity for identity display. User profiles can list information about Second Life identity, groups joined, favourite places, real life identity and so on, an easy-to-access directory of what that user wishes the world to know. In many cases the first information I gain about a new acquaintance includes details of their religious activity, sex life and hobbies that take some time to learn face-to-face.

Given that Linden Labs makes its money from land, it's unsurprising that the designated term for Second Life users is “Resident” – a loaded term favouring heavy users and land-owners over casual visitors. Referring to users as “Residents” helps to construct the ideal Second Life-r as a homeowner and, conversely, to construct the non-homeowner as marginal or uncommitted. Unfortunately, no other name seems preferable. “Player” and “user” are inappropriate for a social world, while “visitor” implies a lack of ownership over the space and “member” suggests a problematic notion of corporate identity. The term “Resident” has been widely adopted in Second Life and will be reluctantly used here, but the significance of this particular construction of the user should not be overlooked. Residents frequently distinguish between “sl” (Second Life) and “rl” (Real Life) when referring to their

offline activities; this “rl” language will also be used in this chapter, again because it is meaningful to Residents and because no obviously preferable alternative is available.

My research in Second Life began at a face-to-face gathering in Guildford, Surrey. This event offered a chance to meet some of the leadership team, and I was able to interview the pastor, Mark Brown, and another leader called Andrew. Following this real-world introduction to the Cathedral community, I spent time learning the basic skills and cultural knowledge required to function in-world, meeting people, becoming known and letting my new acquaintances know about my research project. Sarah, the leader in charge of Epiphany Island’s design, agreed to erect a noticeboard next to the church door announcing my research as an additional way to advertise my presence.

I quote exactly from my in-world interviews throughout this chapter, including original spelling and punctuation, and preserve line breaks to show how statements were posted. A fellow researcher kindly allowed me to borrow her skybox for these conversations – essentially a flying house, which because of its great elevation is unlikely to be discovered or disturbed by visitors – and later built me a sky-office for the same purpose.

INTRODUCING THE ANGLICAN CATHEDRAL OF SECOND LIFE

i) THE ISLAND

The seas around Epiphany are clear and blue, and the sky above is only ever speckled with the thinnest white clouds. It never rains, and snows only when the church's owners want it to – which they do, every (northern hemisphere) winter season. Across a narrow causeway, the next island is dotted with small houses, churches and Christian spaces. No other land is in sight. The Cathedral is built in grey stone and planned in a traditional style, cruciform with a long nave crossed near the east end by short transepts. An apse closes the east end of the church in a half-dome. A mighty square tower rises from the crossing and flying buttresses support the walls all around the perimeter. The nave is filled with rows of wooden pews,

pillars support the roof, and glancing beams of light shine in through stained glass windows onto the floor. Furnishings are also traditional, including an elevated pulpit and a lectern resting on the wings of a brass eagle. The sanctuary area includes a high altar with altar rail, where an incense burner hangs from its stand.



Outside the highly-carved main doorway, a broad plaza offers space to gather. Across the square, giant banners display the “Compass Rose” logo of the Anglican Communion. To one side, benches surround a fireplace, installed in the winter of 2008 to replace a pool of water; to the other side, an array of noticeboards leads to one of several quiet gardens.



When I first visited the island, the Gothic Cathedral was accompanied by a Tudor-themed parish house and a pillared two-storey conference hall. Both have now been replaced with other structures, less elaborate but considerably easier to navigate and use. The parish house and church are connected by underground tunnels containing a study room and crypt.

A deep chasm cuts the island in two, spanned by a bridge leading to a much smaller chapel, also traditional in style but furnished with informal cushions rather than pews. Elsewhere on Epiphany the visitor can find a labyrinth of hedges, a small cove, and a jetty with rowing boats. Birds circle constantly overhead, and a few other creatures – a rabbit, some squirrels – roam across the grounds. If the visitor's speakers are turned on, gentle sounds of birdsong echo around the island.



Chapel, left; Parish House, right

ii) HISTORY

Epiphany Island is the creation of a group called “Anglicans in Second Life”, led at the time of my research by Mark Brown. Brown was then the CEO of the Bible Society in New Zealand,²⁹⁰ a post with significant responsibilities, as he explained during our interview in Guildford: ‘I have 40 staff and a multi-million dollar budget [...] it’s a very big, big and busy role, it’s a very public role.’ Brown considers personal research to be a vital part of his work, and in 2006 that research took him into Second Life:

I felt God calling me to be a thought leader and to be at the cutting edge, this is two years ago, and so that’s what I did, my whole aim was to take a journey to the cutting edge.

290 ‘Bible Society’, <http://biblesociety.org.nz/> . Accessed 10-01-10.

According to Brown, his initial research indicated something he found startling: the world of Second Life was attracting some 600 000 visitors every two months at that stage, but was served by only one church.

I thought, well, a – where is everyone? Where’s the missionary organisations, the Baptists, the Catholics, the Anglicans, why aren’t they here? Well, the answer to that is fairly simple, they don’t have a reputation for being early adopters and this is the cutting edge I would say.

Brown searched for Anglican groups and encountered “Anglicans in Second Life”, which at that stage had just 15 members. The group agreed to meet, and their discussion led Brown to suggest establishing a new church:

And at that meeting, it was really clear to me, I remember the moment where I said, you know what, I think we need a Cathedral. And I remember someone saying no, I think the Cathedral’s too big, we need to start with a small parish and build up. And I said No (laughs), this needs to be really big.

Inspired by this vision, another member of the group contacted a young German student who offered to build the Cathedral:

I remember the moment when I said, well, what are you going to charge? And he said Mark, in his broken, well, it was text at that stage, but I know his English is broken, but he said Mark, I can see this is historical, and I’ll do this for free. He spent five months building it, and it is quite an awesome structure when you understand virtual architecture, it won an award in Second Life, he won quite a bit of money and donated much of it to the community.

Brown became the pastor of the new Cathedral, and was later ordained curate and priest by his Anglican bishop in New Zealand. He stepped down as CEO and Cathedral pastor in 2009, looking for new avenues for his online ministry.

I found many hints and indications during my research that the growth of the first idea of a Cathedral into the worshipping community I encountered had not always been an easy or harmonious one. Early participants referred to acrimonious disputes, departures, power struggles, scandals and the relocation of the Cathedral from one place to another. These stories were by no means consistent, and the same events could be retold as a scandal by one participant and an unremarkable mishap by another, or with quite different sets of heroes and villains.

I have chosen to pay very little attention to past disputes in any of the five case studies I conducted, commenting only on those disagreements that I actually witnessed myself. Such historical work would require intensive commitment of time and energy, collect much sensitive material I could not publish, and probably jeopardize my standing in the community. Discussions of past disagreements are of interest in their own right, however, giving insights into particular individuals' perceptions, and I include some quotes in this chapter as examples of thought rather than guides to history. I mention those tales here to remind the reader, again, that the disagreements discussed in my chapter on i-church are by no means unusual among online churches.

iii) ACTIVITY

The first service of worship at the Cathedral was organised in July 2007, and by mid-2008 three services were being held each week, two on Sundays and a third on Wednesdays. Worship increased by early 2009 to include services on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, making a total of six per week. There are no organised prayer groups, such as those meeting

regularly in St Pixels LIVE, but the use of the Cathedral and its surrounding gardens for private prayer is common and will be discussed later in this chapter.

At the beginning of 2009 three other weekly gatherings were held. A discussion group meets on Saturdays in the open space in front of the Cathedral, and a Bible Study is held just before the Sunday evening service in the conference centre. A smaller Bible Study had also been organised, gathering on a ring of black leather sofas placed precariously on the very top of the Cathedral tower. Unlike all other events at the Cathedral this new study made extensive use of voice chat. The location and style of the meeting highlights one of the curiosities of Second Life, the convergence of real life and fantasy, play and serious intent – a convergence we have already encountered in the activity of Church of Fools and St Pixels.

At the start of 2010, this schedule had expanded further. In addition to the six services and three study groups listed above, Morning Prayer was now held seven days a week, Evening Prayer six and Compline four; a second Wednesday evening service had also been added.

At least two art exhibitions have taken place on the island, one collecting sculptures created in-world on the theme of the Holy Spirit. Seasonal changes are frequently made, including the purchase of a rabbit to roam the island at Easter time, a scattering of snow to mark the winter season, and wreaths and flowers to celebrate Christmas. The day a person registers for Second Life is colloquially known as their “rez-day”, “to rez” being the Second Life term for “to appear”, derived from the movie *Tron*; Mark Brown and his second-in-command, Sarah, have celebrated one another’s “rez-day” anniversaries by erecting signs and banners.

Most evenings find a group of people talking in the plaza outside the Cathedral, and services are almost always preceded and followed by long conversations. When I first entered Second Life in summer 2008 it was not uncommon for the pastor of the Cathedral to lead the gathered crowd in a display of avatar dancing, but even without these energetic pursuits these

conversations can last several hours. As Sarah put it, ‘what motivated me to stick around was really the opportunity to meet people’, like-minded Residents from all over the world, ‘people who are interested in the same things I am’, ‘people with a similar religious sensibility, I suppose.’

iv) COMMUNITY

We can again construct some kind of picture of the community from a survey conducted by church leadership. The survey was conducted early in 2008 with 79 responses.²⁹¹ Findings are reported in “Christian Mission to a Virtual World”, an essay by Mark Brown published online in April of that year. Some 60% of respondents were aged between 31 and 50, 15% younger, and 56% were male.²⁹² These are very similar statistics to those reported in i-church, and suggests a considerably higher proportion of male participants than St Pixels. Just under 20% attended a service at the Cathedral once a fortnight, 35% once a week, and 10% more than once; if we take these statistics as a proportion of the 79 respondents we can ascertain that at least 50 individuals were attending Cathedral services twice a month or more. 67% of respondents attended a local Anglican church and 16% a church of some other denomination.²⁹³

17% of respondents said “the SL service was the only church service they attended”,²⁹⁴ a figure representing some 13 or 14 people. Brown includes an example: ‘I have been housebound for the last 2 years due to disability’, that person wrote, ‘so, at present, this is the only church service I attend.’ I did not meet a single individual in this category during my participant observation, nor could any of the church leaders I approached suggest such a person for me to interview. I met several non-Christians on the island, but these did not come to services. I met one woman who had once attended only the Cathedral, but she had subsequently left and found a new local church. These figures Brown gives are not sub-

²⁹¹ This information was delivered by private communication; the published report gives no indication of survey size.

²⁹² Mark Brown, ‘Christian Mission to a Virtual World’, April 2008. http://brownblog.info/?page_id=409. Accessed 10-01-10. p4

²⁹³ Ibid. p6

²⁹⁴ Ibid. p6

divided according to frequency of attendance, so many of those who do not attend a local church may not have been coming to services at the Cathedral either.

WORSHIP IN SECOND LIFE

In keeping with the style of the build Brown adopted a traditional Anglican style of liturgy based on the service of Evening Prayer, adding modifications as he felt necessary:

if you were a strict liturgist, you'd frown at what we do. [...] I kind of look at the liturgy and say, well, you know, I don't think, obviously we don't need that, I don't need that, and I try to shorten it a bit, Evening Prayer, it's usually, if you're traditional it doesn't have a sermon, I have a sermon.

These sermons were brief, but not otherwise distinctive from talks one might expect to hear in a local church. Nadja Mizcek reports the same observation in her own studies of Church of Fools and two Second Life churches.²⁹⁵ The success of the Cathedral might be mentioned and future vision discussed, but I heard no teachings about how to act in Second Life, how one might define "sin" in-world, or how to live Christian lives online. These were all issues that community members discussed regularly, expressing strongly-held but divergent opinions, but preachers did not touch on them. This omission may have been a tacit endorsement of diverse views, an attempt to broaden the church's appeal to regular Second Life users by avoiding controversy, or a desire to remain experimental and let congregation members learn for themselves how to act in-world. Most probably, this omission reflects confidence that well-taught Christians would instinctively know what to do online.

Cathedral services include a time of open prayer, another innovation Brown considers very successful:

²⁹⁵ Nadja Mizcek, "Online Rituals in Virtual Worlds: Christian Online Services between Dynamics and Stability," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 03, no. 1 (2008). p157

those sessions can sometimes go on for a good ten plus minutes, to fifteen minutes, and they are very moving, I mean people pray for their close relatives with cancer, it's really out there. Now they are connecting with people from around the world.

In our interview, Brown expressed some reservations about this liturgical format. While he felt a traditional form of architecture to be necessary, he hoped that more innovative forms might be devised for the new context of virtual world worship:

what we probably need to get to is actually finding people who will write liturgy for Second Life. Now, that's not just words, that could be places, it could be music. I mean, there is actually a lot of scope for creativity, but at the moment, baby steps.

Despite this expressed intent, services have continued to follow established patterns. Andrew, for example, explained that his services 'use a variety of liturgies, usually Celtic, liturgies from the Iona community, Northumbria Community', an approach that he described as 'deliberately experimental' while remaining 'almost like Anglican Evening Prayer' in structure, with the addition of a meditation and 'a time of open prayer'. This may be experimental, but it is a kind of experiment clearly rooted in established offline worship practices.

My interviews suggested that the reassuringly recognisable worship style was welcomed by those attending, and that assessments of successful worship were little different from those operating offline. Diane, for example, described Sunday Compline as 'a restful service, and a wonderful way to transition from one week to the next', and justified online worship biblically: 'I am a great believer in "When two or more are gathered in My name, I am with you."' Ed explained that he valued the look of the Cathedral and the Anglican style of worship because it made the event seem more 'real', and 'for a service I like the feeling

that I am “in” a church’. The visual representation of a church was important because it enabled Ed to see that other people were present.

I encountered a minority of visitors who hoped to find some kind of ideal, purified church online, separate from politics, intrigue and conflict, but no one I spoke to had come online seeking the kind of totally new, artistically creative “liturgy for Second Life” that could theoretically be achieved through the use of available building and animation tools. The continuity of online and offline worship here is a deliberate and welcome choice, not a failure of creativity or imagination – as I observed in my studies of Church of Fools, i-church and St Pixels.

The traditionalism of services also extends to the provision of animations. Each pew includes “pose balls”, built in animation options. A visitor sits in these pews during services, can choose to kneel, and is invited to stand for the reading of the Gospel. Mark Brown has made the additional investment of buying a personal animation that he can operate to cause his avatar to cross itself.

These are all examples of the power of animations to reinforce familiarity. I encountered no examples of liturgical innovation involving avatars at the Cathedral – aside, perhaps, from the occasional outbreaks of dancing Mark Brown and others sometimes indulged in to entertain the congregation after services. Church of Fools also created a virtual world with pews and liturgical services, but gestures were used much more in worship, prayer and social interaction. According to Nadja Miczek, ‘many people participated actively in the services by using different gestures’, including combining hands-high gestures to make Mexican waves,²⁹⁶ and Simon Jenkins mentions such liturgical elements as tearing out hair to symbolize lament²⁹⁷ or shaking hands with thin air to show connection with invisible onlookers.²⁹⁸ In interviews, some Cathedral congregants explained that their use of these animations was stifled by the lag problems associated with animating an avatar in Second

²⁹⁶ Ibid. p157

²⁹⁷ Simon Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels: Experiments in an Online Church," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 03, no. 1 (2008), 110

²⁹⁸ Ibid. 110

Life, and this was certainly my own experience – standing up in a crowded room could stall the program completely. Others explained that they disconnected their camera view from their avatar and zoomed in on the service leader, cutting out the rest of the environment and so speeding their connection.

Those who did use gestures in worship followed their “real life” practice with minimal innovation. Ashley, a High Anglican, explained ‘I’ve never been one for the handswaying in rl so I don’t do that here’ – ‘I guess its all what is most like rl.’ For this user, animations make the experience of worship seem more “real” by copying the actions that accompany the “real” – an attitude I encountered among some Church of Fools members.

In a small number of cases, interviewees told me that their avatar performance was accompanied by physical actions performed in front of the computer. Fred, a High Anglican church organist, says Compline at home every night and crosses himself at the appropriate points throughout; when he attends worship online, he does the same. Interestingly, though, he added that this practice of physical action could be superseded by the avatar: ‘maybe if I could animate my avatar I wouldn’t do it in rl’.

Outside these times of set worship, visitors to the Cathedral also engage in informal times of prayer. These prayers may be shared with specific individuals, groups, or pursued privately. Henry, a regular visitor, suggested in our interview that ‘there is a core group of people who hang around and welcome people’, a practice that ‘has resulted in spontaneous prayer at times’, while Mark Brown claimed that private prayer was common: ‘I know people who go there and pray before they start work every day.’

Every Saturday visitors to the Cathedral are welcomed to an open discussion, focused on what it means to be Christian in Second Life. This pursuit of contextual theology through open discussion instead of authoritative teaching is reminiscent of Church of Fools, i-church and St Pixels, although leadership members are present to supervise the interaction. On

February 7th 2009 the Saturday discussion centred on the question of online prayer, and the nine participants kindly agreed to let me quote them here.

Most of the conversation addressed practices of group prayer. June, one of the regular visitors to the Cathedral who took part in my interviews, explained that ‘Kevin [another regular I was able to interview] and I sometimes meet to pray’ and added by private message that ‘I don’t, in fact, pray with others in rl but do in sl’. Several others also claimed that Second Life had helped develop some aspect of their prayer. Diane felt ‘more comfortable’ and less self-conscious praying in groups in Second Life. This comfort came partly from anonymity – ‘you don’t feel so much the people looking at you’, Kevin explained - and partly from control. ‘maybe in SL’, Diane suggested, ‘we have more control over our friends, because we can just leave when we are uncomfortable’. For some this new spiritual confidence carried over into “real life”. According to Diane, ‘SL has made me a little less shy in RL, about Prayer as well as walking up to strangers and introducing myself!’. For Kevin ‘SL helps me discover the power of praying together with other people’.

Thoughts were also offered on the practice of private prayer. Mandy, pastor of a Second Life church on behalf of a “real-life” cathedral in the United States, explained that she found praying online to be ‘comforting’ and ‘satisfying’. ‘I often come to SL to do my RL prayers’ – ‘I’ve found SL to be a great addition to my spiritual practice’, ‘just helps me be reminded that I need to stop and pray’. Presence in Second Life, particularly at places like gardens that could be perceived as ‘beautiful’ or at sites designated as ‘spiritual’, helped participants to focus. Sarah agreed: ‘I think it helps take me out of the day to day world and concerns’.

Another explanation was offered in an interview with Sam. Sam prays both on the web and in Second Life, and his goal is not focus but connection:

Sam: when i read morning prayer online over breakfast before the kids get up, i feel like i am connected to everyone else who is reading it as well as opposed to just reading out of a book

Sam: one thing i have done quite a bit in the mornings is to log in to SL, visit the cathedral, and read morning prayer while my avatar is sitting there

Sam recounted an experience in a “real-life” church, when a time of private prayer was interrupted by the presence of another, creating a powerful sense of connection. Being visibly present in a church-like space recalled that special moment and added to his perception of connectedness.

Many of those I met spoke of the importance of the avatar in Second Life prayer, with three main themes that develop ideas expressed above. Participants argued that the avatar offered a powerful sense of co-presence, of actually being with other people – as Sarah explained, ‘when I am talking to someone in SL, and our avatars are together, I feel like I am "with" them’. They also explained that the movements of the avatar actually help to set aside a period for prayer: as June put it, ‘When I'm praying with someone, the kneeling stops the conversation and starts the praying’. The avatar here acts as a communication tool, a non-verbal way to frame a particular period of time within a specific activity context; kneeling signals that prayer is expected, not talk, communicating a mood rather than actually creating it. Finally, the movement of the avatar contributed to their sense of focus. Olive commented in our interview that she had enjoyed navigating the island’s labyrinth: ‘the concentration was good I think [...] it helped me to think, to be still, even though my avatar wasn't!’ These comments qualify my earlier observations regarding lack of innovative use of gestures in worship: at least in private prayer, familiar gestures like kneeling or walking may be used in familiar ways but with new and distinctive meanings and purposes.

One dissenting voice was heard in the discussion quoted above. One participant insisted that it was not place that made prayer possible but people. Indeed, according to this participant it would be difficult to pray at all with people he did not intellectually agree with.

‘I find that the people are what make it’, he argued, ‘I like the places, but without the people, Its just a place.’ Those who had been discussing their search for “spiritual places” in Second Life did not disagree completely, but incorporated his view into a more nuanced explanation of their own. As Sarah explained, ‘the people imbue the place with that atmosphere.’ Discussion of worship cannot be undertaken in isolation from discussions of people and place, an observation that leads us on to the next topic of this chapter: the fostering of atmosphere and activity through the development of architectural space.

ARCHITECTURE, SPACE AND DESIGN

Mark Brown's explanation for his determination to build a Cathedral is worth quoting at length. He breaks down his reasoning into three sections. First, the church design should be ‘very clearly Christian, an icon, a symbol of Christianity’. Second, he hoped that his design would create publicity:

I wanted to create buzz, and guess what, it has [laughs]. You know, when the media got hold of it I’ve been on TV, radio, gosh, I don’t know how many, seriously, I don’t know how many times, radio in the US, Australia, New Zealand, you know, newspapers, weblogs, a huge number of blogs, and a big part of it is a) Anglican, b) Cathedral?, and c) high technology, that creates a buzz. If I just build another, I don’t know, just an open space with some pillows on the ground and a cross in the corner, I don’t think it would have got the same.

It's interesting to note here that Brown sees a more informal style of church design, something breaking with traditional patterns of architecture, as less innovative and exciting than the continuity represented by his cathedral. It is the juxtaposition of the stereotypically ancient and established style of Anglican cathedral-building with the “cutting edge” of

fashionable technology that creates media appeal; note the parallels here with Church of Fools.

Third, according to Brown, a traditional design was actually best suited to contemporary spirituality:

the third reason is my very simplistic assessment of post-modernity with its fascination with tradition and what I call deep Christianity, the lectio divina, the meditation, the kind of saints, the mystery of the Middle Ages, that's all in, I mean that's kind of in at the moment. The second interest of post-moderns is technology, you know, synchronous communication, blah blah blah. So I thought, here's a way to combine the two. It's pretty crude, but let's give it a go.

The suggestion that contemporary spirituality makes any “deep” connection with tradition is perhaps questionable, but what's significant here is the perception that this is so, and the desire to meet that perception through the creation of “traditional” spaces. The Second Life Cathedral does not actually pursue any of the traditions Brown lists – there are no meetings for the Lectio Divina style of Bible reading, for example, and no public devotion to saints. What the Cathedral does offer is a collection of spaces in which architecture and design have been used to imply tradition, structuring space according to well-known, instantly-recognisable symbols, categories, themes and patterns, and these spaces communicate a connection with tradition, with something larger and more ancient than the gathered congregation. Brown does not describe his vision in these terms, but a compatible theme emerges in the idea of “grounding”:

[The Cathedral] grounds what is actually a fairly amorphous experience, it is literally out of body. And I think if you're too esoteric in your architecture, in your presentation of the church facility, you'll just trip people out. It'll appeal to people who feel comfortable in that kind of very esoteric world, but my experience is they're fairly minor part of the population. So it's a trick, a perception trick, of course it is, it doesn't exist, but it tricks

people into believing that actually it's a real cathedral. And the evidence of that is that I know people who go there and pray before they start work every day.

Worshipping online, communicating with God, in the company of people scattered across the world, while remaining alone, is a strange and novel experience. The recognisable reality of the Cathedral offers some foundation to that experience, a connection with more familiar and embodied experiences, and that foundation reassures the visitor that the Cathedral can be a genuine place of holiness and prayer. This architectural referencing of reality is closely related to the discussion of worship above, particularly the idea that animations of the avatar can help to enhance the sense of being in a "real" church. For some, at least, this "perception trick" is central to the creation of sacred space for authentic worship.

Interviews with other leaders parallel Brown's comments closely. Andrew, a Methodist minister in the UK, entered Second Life independently of Mark Brown but with very similar intentions. While Brown hoped to write a research paper, Andrew hoped to investigate the possibility of establishing a "Fresh Expression", a new kind of church, in the virtual world. He too found the style of existing churches off-putting: 'A number of them felt very American to me, they had that style, and I was a little uncomfortable with that'. Both men also make similar points about post-modernism: 'if I was going to create a Christian community it would involve having a recreation of a church, something recognisable, because of the post-modern fascination with the old, and the sense of this, of the old coming into the new, I thought was, had resonance.' Andrew adds the interesting observation that tradition is not merely a post-modern fascination, but a peculiarly Second Life one:

I think in this particular instance [traditional style] is a strength, because of the preoccupation with many people in Second Life to create something that reflects the real. So rather than when you go around Second Life seeing skyboxes everywhere and things completely weird, what people are constructing are replicas of real homes, and there's that sort of, um, of mindset in people, there's a desire to create something, something real into Second Life.

The traditional style, then, is perceived to be both cutting-edge and culturally-relevant. Sarah argues in our in-world interview that

Sarah: there seems to be an attraction to that kind of tradition.

Sarah: really, you can see evidence of that all over SL

and adds the key point that ‘people in SL really appreciate a nice build, one that obviously has a lot of care and thought put into it.’ The Cathedral's design succeeds not just because it looks old but because it looks complex, well-designed, impressive, and shows signs of care and skill; to this extent, it fits very well into the existing design culture of Second Life.

While the Cathedral was built according to a pre-conceived understanding of society and the role of architecture, the grounds of Epiphany Island have been allowed to evolve more gradually. Sarah was in charge of site design at the time of our interview in mid-2008, and reported that “I (that is we) figured out what would be included on the island by listening to what people like to do there.” Parts of the island, notably the labyrinth, were built in response to gifts from community members. Other sections were redesigned to respond to preferences expressed by visitors:

Sarah: well, in the original design of the island, there was a meditation garden, that people really liked.

Sarah: so, we wanted to bring that back.

The key point, however, is the construction of spaces that will facilitate or encourage the kinds of activity that the leadership team wishes to foster:

Sarah: we knew that people come to Epiphany for it's meditative atmosphere,so that's where we got the idea for the meditation chapel. [...]

Sarah: but overall, people like to come there for fellowship, so, I wanted to design areas where people could gather together as well.

Andrew: Some of it is what people can make of it, and so people can explore their spirituality by exploring the labyrinth, some can go to the little chapel if they feel that the cathedral is too big, if they're wanting a much more intimate sense of being with God they can be there, they can explore the grounds, walk amongst the trees, take the boats around the island, so in some ways the ground is there to make of what you will.

These accounts are offered in terms of answering the needs of visitors and resourcing visitor choice, but it is certainly appropriate to interpret these comments in terms of shaping as well as resourcing activity. If people come to Epiphany for its meditative atmosphere, it is at least partly because the environment already created there encourages that form of activity. Visitors are encouraged to explore their spirituality, but certain specific forms of spirituality and of social activity have been identified from a much wider range of possible options, and these forms are prioritised and resourced to direct community life toward an ideal form that leaders wish to cultivate. This ideal form develops in conversation with community norms and practices but not purely in response to it.

Virtual architecture is not empty and passive but actively structures the kinds of activity that take place in the spaces it creates, contributing to particular moods and practices. As sociologist Mark Nunes argues, space must be understood as a social product, a dynamic process involving material forms, conceptual structures and lived practices;²⁹⁹ the “meditative atmosphere” of Epiphany Island arises from a combination of the material forms of the user at the computer screen, the “virtual architecture” presented as images on that screen, the

299 Mark Nunes, *Cyberspaces of Everyday Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). pxx

concepts symbolised by the image of a traditional church in a natural environment, the understanding of Christian life that sets meditative peace as a central value, and the actual practices of visiting and spending time alone or in quiet conversation in that virtual space.

One interviewee, Paula, voiced some particularly interesting criticisms of the design of the island, seeing this design as a reflection of a controlling and aggressive leadership style. The key issue here is not the accuracy of her perception but her understanding of the connection between architecture, self and control; in Nunes' terms, the relationship between material form, conceptual structures and lived practice. According to Paula, the island once held a garden she particularly liked:

Paula: It was a rose garden

Paula: with statues

Paula: pretty and feminine

This area was designed by a particular member of the leadership team who left the group before I first registered in Second Life, in a series of events described by several interviewees as a “power struggle” (Sarah). Her departure was marked by the destruction of the areas she had built. According to one current leader, the departing individual had removed everything she had built herself, selfishly deleting her work from the island. For Paula, however, this removal was a traumatic event that marked the entire island with an unmistakable sign of violence and control:

Paula: they ruined the island

Paula: they derezzed [her] garden

Paula: and placed a huge gorge there

Paula: it almost felt like a rape to 'exorcise' her

Paula: It did the trick

Paula: she no longer comes

[...]

Paula: but I got told it was derezzed as E had left and they wanted 'control'

Paula: the objects could have been given group ID

Creative work reflects more than simply a material form and the effects of form on practice. Creativity is an extension of the self, and the mistreatment of creative work can be perceived as mistreatment of the creator. The positioning of creative work within the community is interpreted here as a communicative act, a statement regarding the acceptance or expulsion of the actual creator, drawing the boundaries of community membership through manipulation of the environment. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the process of design decision-making was controversial for several interviewees, and that three expressed regret or anger that their own creations had not been accepted into the Cathedral's grounds.

Another objection was raised by Mark Brown himself, in our interview. Adopting a familiar style of architecture makes one key assumption: that the visitor is in fact familiar and comfortable with that style. According to Brown, 'what I've found is that, um, actually, um, I think people who are not used to cathedrals come in and feel a bit intimidated and a bit confused, why did you build a cathedral?'. I encountered similar concerns in my interviews. Quentin, based in Australia, questioned the geographical breadth of appeal of such a design:

One of the problems even about the look of the place is that it is very English or European. It does not cater for Asians Africans or South Americans for instance, yet I am sure the Anglican churches are more culturally relevant for those cultures.

For Quentin, to design a church in a recognised style is to limit the church's audience to those for whom that style is familiar and significant, an important decision for a

supposedly global religion like Christianity. Familiarity can also be a limitation for a church seeking broad theological appeal: Paula claimed that the design of the cathedral indicated a High Church affiliation that excluded her from participation.

We have already encountered a number of non-Christian members of St Pixels who disliked the worship there because it reminded them too much of being in church, so these drawbacks of reliance on the familiar is not unique to the Cathedral. Ultimately, Brown dismisses such objections: ‘I think the proof’s in the pudding, is that actually we are, we’re growing. So you have to kind of say well, I would, I would, suggest, it’s anecdotal but I would suggest that part of the success is that we have a cathedral.’

Despite these reservations, the actual aesthetic appeal of the Cathedral was unchallenged. Even Paula was unstinting in her praise, describing the build as ‘beautiful’, the builder as ‘inspired’. ‘Aesthetically’, she claimed, ‘it is fantastic’. The attempt to create mood through the design of space also received general appreciation. According to Kevin, ‘Architecture helps set the atmosphere - peaceful, not too jokey or trivial’. For Olive, the difference in style between the cathedral and the smaller chapel that stands alongside it created a difference in atmosphere relevant to the activity of prayer: ‘I like the whole feel of this area’, she explained, particularly the light colours and big windows – ‘there’s a sense of uncluttered space’, compared to the relatively ‘fussy’ Cathedral, and as a result ‘I think it would be easier to pray here’. Again, a peaceful atmosphere is created through the use of recognised architectural styles – minimalist rooms illuminated by natural light, in a manner Olive considered attractive and calming.

A rather different perspective is provided by one of the two non-Christians I interviewed. Rachel is an “eclectic witch” from Scotland who visits Second Life daily, and agreed to a series of three interviews in-world; we will encounter the other non-Christian, an American Buddhist called Stephen, later in this chapter. Rachel's Second Life activity involves much attention to the dynamics of space, and our interviews have been conducted in a pagan “Henge” high in her private skybox, during a pagan gathering in a ground-level sim, and amid the meditation poseballs of a Buddhist zone. Rachel introduced the henge in our

first interview as ‘where I think about things’, and suggests that it ‘looks better in the midnight mode’. ‘i meditate in the henge’, she explains, where she can be alone, but ‘i worship with others at esbats on the island’ [a pagan sim]. Esbats are full-moon rituals, ‘just a giving thanks for being alive thing’.

Rachel visits the Second Life Cathedral every day. As she explained in our third interview in August 08,

Rachel: i visit more often than you think probably.....i'm on sl every day..so i could almost guarantee i make an appearance once a day ...that doesn't mean to say i stay long each time,but its a place i go to .esp..at the end of the day..when i need some 'lag-free' space to IM my goodnights etc..otherwise i take a walk around the gardens probably about twice a week ..and the same for inside..tho not necessarily on the same visit :-)

Off-world, Rachel also enjoys visiting churches:

Rachel: most of them are built on ground which has ben sacred for possibly thousands of years..

Rachel: the 'energy' i talk about when i discuss them has been part of the earth since time began...just because an 'all good god' has claimed it for his own..it ain't gonna keep me out:-)

Despite this apparently irreducibly physical explanation for the “energy” of church spaces, this spiritual power can be found in the virtual world as well:

Interviewer: so do you find that "energy" in sl religious spaces too?

Rachel : surprisingly yes..

Rachel : ...i have a theory that it is something carried in the 'love' that the people who actually built them have somehow transferred

[...]

Rachel : but its a spiritual energy..which can possibly be transferred thru the web..electricity

[...]

Interviewer: is it possible that the "energy spots" you've said exist on earth might exist in sl too?

Rachel : yes ,thats entirely possible..i'm not sure if they exist at the 'actual place' of 'worship' or possibly the place just 'focuses' your mind into a collective consciousness type of thing?

These energy spots can be found in the Second Life Cathedral, “and not just the building, but the whole island”. Rachel discovered this energy by “instinct”, when searching for a space to sit quietly, “just 'chill' and feel .. by myself without being alone”.

Rachel does not express any concern at the prospect of entering a church off-world and much prefers attending Christian services in “real life”. When I asked about Second Life church services, she commented that ‘they annoy me on a personal level’, as events where her non-Christian contributions are unhelpful, and expressed a preference for sitting at the back of a physical church, leaving part-way through and looking around the graveyard. Nonetheless, the architecture of the Cathedral and the spaces that surround it create an atmosphere that she can perceive as “energy”, comparable in effect to the experience of visiting an ancient holy space in “rl”.

The convergence of material form, conceptual structures and lived practice in the creation of architectural space is found also in the creation of the visible self, the avatar. Here too we see central values of the community deployed to structure practices of creation and

display, good and bad use of resources and to mark boundaries for the group, and examination of practices of the self can tell us much about the life and culture of this particular group.

PRESENTING THE SELF: AVATARS AND BEHAVIOUR AT THE CATHEDRAL

Second Life requires the new Resident to construct a visible representation, an “avatar”, to act as a visible presence in-world. The basic tools of the registration process enable the user to create a simple human form and select a range of clothing, but more sophisticated looks – including carefully and realistically toned and contoured skin, complex hairstyles, fashionable clothing and attire and, if required, designer body parts – must be sought out among the freebie stalls, stores and markets organised by other Residents in-world. This creation and display of identity illuminates group themes and values and offers insights into the sometimes complex relationships between Second Life and the “real world” outside.

My interviews with Cathedral-goers included questions about avatar design and yielded a number of interesting comments. Accounts followed certain major categories. For some, the avatar should be as realistic as possible, as a matter of honesty; these respondents sounded much like those I met at St Pixels and i-church. For others, some degree of improvement was acceptable, or the creation of an “ideal me”. Some used their avatars to explore some aspect of their identity that they could not embody in “real life”, or to experience a new and different kind of identity. Finally, a small group used their avatars as a kind of play, without trying to reflect or pretend to reflect their true selves at all. This spectrum of representation ran from realism to pure fantasy, and the range of associations between “Second Life” and “real life” was almost as broad.

I claimed in my study of St Pixels that the online churches I have studied permit certain forms of pseudonymity and forbid others, according to well-understood shared norms, and use this shared cultural competence to create trust and relationship in spaces that could easily be used for simulation and identity play. The diversity of avatar design philosophies I found at the Cathedral might seem to undermine the grounds of shared trust and relationships in this community. Further consideration helps to indicate how the community negotiates this danger, and where the lack of consensus about acceptable behaviour raises troubling concern and suspicion.

Henrik Bennetson, a research director at Stanford, suggested in 2006 that Second Life philosophies could be characterized as either “immersionist” or “augmentationist”, respectively perceiving Second Life as an independent reality and as an extension of existing Internet technologies.³⁰⁰ This approach can easily and helpfully be applied to community life online. Andrew explained to me in our interview in Guildford that

I think there are two distinct types of people in Second Life. There are those who want to be themselves, it's almost as if it's a Facebook presence, they are here to socially interact as themselves, it's just they are different media. Another group of people want to come to Second Life because it is a Second Life for them, it's a way of exploring a different life, or perhaps aspects of their own lives that it is, that they can't fulfil in real life.

For Andrew, both types of people come to Epiphany and can be welcomed there. Most importantly – and this point will recur throughout this section – those who display elements of fantasy will often set those aside in conversation at the Cathedral, letting something of their true self show through. Some appear in ‘full role-play mode’, complete with clerical collars and robes, or take on more outlandish forms, but still engage in sincere conversation:

³⁰⁰ Henrik Bennetson, ‘Augmentation vs Immersion’, *SL Creativity*, last edited 06-12 2006. http://www.slcreativity.org/wiki/index.php?title=Augmentation_vs_Immersion. Accessed 10-01-10.

There are also those who appear outrageously, as fantasy characters, but I find they don't tend to come to the church as that fantasy character, you can still talk to them and find out where they're from, something of themselves, so it's simply the avatar that they usually use, but they're coming to the cathedral for something that is, that is real.

As Bennetson and other commentators recognised, immersionist and augmentationist viewpoints are endpoints on a continuous spectrum. My interviewee Ashley expressed this well:

Ashley: sl is in this weird middle ground between fantasy and reality

Ashley: that is hard to explain

Ashley: Its not purely fantasy

Ashley: but its also not purely reality

Ashley: its somewhere right in between

Ashley: thinking about it too hard makes your head explode

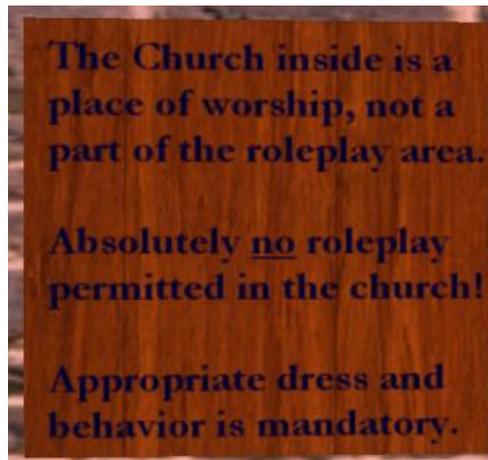
Olive is a good example of the “realism” school of avatar design. Her avatar at the time of our interview was relatively short, middle-aged and heavy-set, and she explained that ‘I made mine fatter to be a little bit more realistic’ – ‘I'm inherently honest’. Tanya, on the other hand, comments that ‘My avatar is an ideal me’ - in fact, ‘I think she is hot:’)’. Thomas shared a similar view: ‘SL is great as you have an awful lot of freedom to express fantasy - e.g. in RL I've always wanted hair and beard like this’.

The role of fantasy in Second Life permits avatar creation well outside the parameters of “human” identity. Rachel's character, while human, displays a cat's tail and vampire teeth; Vivian appeared as an angel, or a mermaid. Others at the Cathedral have taken avatars based

on gnomes, centaurs, human-like creatures (“furrries”) and natural-looking animals; the group discussion of prayer that I quoted above was quietly observed by a hippopotamus.

These examples all indicate something of the culture of the Cathedral, where these kinds of dress and behaviour were generally accepted. A very wide range of interpretations of avatar design were permitted, in the hope – based on experience – that even those trying to role-play would engage in sincere conversation at least from time to time. I have seen some exploration of the boundaries of this approach, but no clear consensus. The CODEC conference “Christianity in the Digital Space”, held in Durham in 2009, included some discussion from Cathedral members regarding the appropriateness of permitting a dragon avatar to lead worship. Should a church leader be held to stricter standards of transparency in their avatar design? Few Second Life churches object to such fantastical avatars, but a more significant issue is nudity. Genitalia and naked bodies of all shapes and sizes are readily available in Second Life, and occasionally make their way into church settings. My conversations with Cathedral members suggested that such events were much disliked, but that naked avatars were ejected from the island because they tended to seek to disrupt and offend, not specifically because of their nakedness.

The emphasis Cathedral members placed on taking time to judge the sincerity of the individual, rather banning certain kinds of dress or role-play behaviour outright, was not shared by all Second Life churches and should be interpreted as a cultural feature of this particular group. I include here a screenshot from a noticeboard posted outside “The Church of Our Saviour”, where rather stricter policies were enforced:



At the German-language “Catholic Church of St George”, a notice in English was more specific:

Feel free to visit our church and the surrounding gardens. You are welcome!

Please respect our rules. No use of weapons, no nudity, no simulation of sacraments, no weddings.

Prayer activities, celebrations of any kind must be authorized by the Freiburg team.

The most interesting avatars for the researcher are those which play closely with the fine and blurring line between reality and fantasy, passing as realistic while incorporating hidden or publicly displayed elements of role-play and the fantastical. It is here that misunderstanding and deception are most likely, and community trust most vulnerable. Observations of these blurrings and passings help to identify some of the boundaries of an online community, regarding what is acceptable, what is unacceptable, and what is valued as authentic or genuine.

For Fred, a white teacher from Texas, Second Life offers the chance to explore a new ethnic identity:

Fred : I knew what I wanted from teh start.

Fred : I knew I wanted to an Asian, tall, slim

Fred : I'm white not so tall in rl

Fred : with an average build.

Interviewer : so not asian irl?

Fred : no

Interviewer : what made you want this particular look?

Fred : I love Asian cultures

Fred : My friends even hae described me as an Asian trapped in a white body

I did not see Fred's Asian-ness questioned or challenged by other visitors to the Cathedral, and this appeared to be acceptable as a valid form of self-representation.

For Sam and Ashley, Second Life offered the chance to explore not ethnicity but gender. Both are male, but both have created female avatars. Sam hoped 'to experience life as a woman', exploring an important side of his real-life self: 'i have always identified with what would be feminine roles and traits.....communal actions, nurturing and such'. Ashley explains that 'I thought it'd be interesting to be the opposite gender', but claims that his actual behaviour is unchanged – 'It is hard for me not to be me'. While Sam claims his/her appearance is unimportant, Ashley created his ideal woman – designing the avatar according to 'basically what I find attractive'. Ashley believes that his adventures have introduced him to a number of social differences in the treatment of men and women, from a new ease in making female friends and 'a lot of men flirting with me in really degrading ways' to new rules of conversation: 'I find that strong opinions are not as welcome from me', 'a lot of people do not like a woman having strong opinions.' Clearly, Ashley's new female self has introduced him more directly than before to some of the realities of living in a gendered culture. Equally clearly, that gendered culture is not being noticeably undermined in Second Life, even with its commonplace switching of genders. Stereotypes and cultural expectations

remain, just as the past decade of Internet scholarship would lead us to expect, even though the boundaries of who may act male or female may have been shifted or weakened. Both Ashley and Sam acted in accordance with Andrew's description of the Second Life fantasist, quoted above, and "came out" to friends as soon as they started to become engaged in meaningful friendships, seeking to avoid misleading those they were close to, and both told me they were men using female avatars very early on in our acquaintance.

One final example of avatar creation is worth discussing here. One of my interviewees, Paula, spoke about her creation of an "alt". The alt is an entirely separate character, with a new name, profile and look, and can live an independent existence in Second Life away from the main character; my methods chapter includes a brief discussion of my decision not to operate such alts in my research. Paula's main avatar took considerable time to create, closely resembles her, and operates mainly in Christian regions, but seems permanently entangled in complex and acrimonious struggles and disputes over her attempts to gain recognition as a leader and creative designer. Eventually 'I wanted to start afresh', and the new alt, Wendy, was created to spend time in areas related to Paula's secular career. Paula was startled to discover that Wendy's look, designed to be taller, younger and more confident, accidentally ended up as a representation of her own "real life" daughter. Paula is one example of a possibility raised by Kevin in our interview: 'you can easily create a new avatar if your old one gets into trouble'.

Kevin also suggested that the continuity of using the same avatar from one visit to another helped reinforce group solidarity, and some of my encounters with alts and rumours of alts suggested that the reverse might also be true: the suspicion that alts might be present, without any certain knowledge of where they might be, undermined group solidarity. My only other encounters with alts, apart from Paula and Wendy, have been through gossip and intrigue. Several Residents I spoke to voiced suspicions that old opponents in the Cathedral, or visitors who had just left our company, had behaved so strangely that their characters must surely have been alts – seeing an alt as somehow less authentic than a primary avatar, an instrument rather than a full persona, and highly suspect.

Both Sam and Ashley were open about their gender play to their friends and to visitors to the Cathedral – Ashley including information about his gender on his Profile – and just like Fred, they remain important and welcome in the community. Where role-play was known and understood, it was not viewed as a threat to community trust. This tolerance is not matched throughout Second Life, as the notices quoted above indicate. As I mentioned in my methods chapter, Gregory Price Grieve has discussed an occasion when he visited a church site with a female avatar and pagan dress. The gathering responded angrily, insisting he prove that he was actually female; here, neither pagan nor gender-role-play identities were acceptable, and Grieve felt compelled to use a voice distorter to enable him to pass the spoken-voice test the group imposed on him. In the Cathedral, in contrast, sincerity and authenticity are not so closely associated with realistic avatar design.

Certain forms of representation do arouse anxiety at the Cathedral. While Fred's Asian self goes unremarked, for example, Stephen's visits to Epiphany have created a controversial, marginal persona, a topic of affectionate but not wholly approving conversation. Stephen is a white American who describes himself as a solitary Buddhist, but he describes his first appearance at the Cathedral as 'a black catholic priest asking for church wine money', and later returned as a Korean Zen master in flowing robes. On each occasion he adopted a stereotyped, racialized form of speech and spelling and tried to act in character. 'I couldn't make a friend in the world as the black priest', he notes ruefully. He explains his actions in terms of a misguided voyage of self-discovery:

Stephen : anyway...i was kinda exploring myself

Stephen : through my avatar

Stephen : seeing, or testing, how others would react to me

Interviewer: did you expect anyone to believe you?

Stephen : believe what?

Interviewer: believe you were a real priest, black guy, korean, zen master etc

Stephen : oh no, in fact it sometimes became embarrassing

Stephen : when i would be asked

Stephen : i'd have to answer that i'm just being an irreverent jackass

Genuine distaste, however, is reserved at the Cathedral for two groups of individuals: griefers (those deliberately seeking to cause offense, like the “troll” visitors to the Church of Fools) and false clergy. False clergy are a perennial issue for people I interviewed from the Cathedral community, and the ease with which anyone can create a new character, buy some vestments, buy a church and set themselves up as a pastor is perceived by some as cause for grave concern. The issue of interest here is not the actual status of these leaders, which would be difficult to determine, but the shared perceptions of authority and deceit among the Cathedral-going congregation that these themes reveal. For Ashley, for example, confidence in the licensed authority of pastors is key. One Second Life church leader, according to Ashley, ‘has not been to a day of seminary’ and copies his sermons from the Internet, but falsely claims to be a pastor in “real life”. The Anglican foundation of the Cathedral offers Ashley a guarantee against such abuses:

Interviewer : so why does it matter for you that [Mark Brown] is recognised as a real priest, and has his church recognised by a real diocese?

Interviewer : is that important?

Ashley : yes

Ashley : because I think that by putting yourself out there as a spiritual leader in sl

Ashley : you give yourself an air of authority

Ashley : and people will listen to what you say

Ashley : and if you dont' really have the bible knowledge and the temperament for the job

Ashley : that can be dangerous

Ashley : which is why [the untrained pastor] worries me

Along with this hostility to unlicensed clergy, certain kinds of church-like activity also met with disapproval. The Cathedral's architectural space was designed to closely resemble a real-world church, and so included an altar, but performances of weddings, Eucharist or Baptism – all practices offered at other Second Life churches – were ruled out by the leadership. This issue marks something of a divisive issue in the community, particularly the celebration of weddings between Residents who meet, declare themselves in love and set up house together in-world. While the Cathedral leadership refuses to give such events spiritual authority or blessing, several interviewees excitedly told me about their adventures in romance, and others directed me to spirited and acrimonious debates over this question on the Cathedral's blog. Second Life romance might well include Second Life sex, a possibility that raised urgent questions about the nature of sin and left at least one interviewee nursing years of anger toward those who had condoned such behaviour.

The question of grieving was important for the Cathedral when I first arrived. Services were mainly undisturbed, but visitors to the discussion group and Bible study frequently provoked intense arguments, mocked Christian earnestness or displayed avatars the group considered inappropriate. Tanya runs the Saturday Bible studies, and distinguishes between the merely argumentative and actual grievers. Those who dominate, 'pushing their beliefs', are perceived as a problem, but not as grievers; that title is reserved for those with 'a 20 foot penis hanging out', 'also stupid remarks about how Jesus should have smoked more pot', or 'how all Christians are idiots or that we are all going to hell'. Tanya's distinction separates those with serious but misguided intent, those who want to discuss their views, from those who only want to cause confusion and distress. Rare though these clashes are, Tanya found them upsetting: 'it puts a sour taste in your mouth when you get a griever'. Tanya admits that Mark Brown's view was more lenient than hers, 'because you never know when a person will stop being a griever and come to be a friend'. Stephen's progress from racial stereotyping to his current activity, running a serious Buddhist retreat centre in Second Life, would be a case in point.

In conclusion, then, attention to the construction, display and deployment of avatars at Epiphany Island shows an interesting convergence of fantasy and reality. Visitors to the island may represent themselves in a variety of ways without group censure, but the recurrent theme was authenticity, a perception of the avatar as an extension of the self, a channel through which the self can be expressed and known; as Thomas and most other interviewees put it, 'I don't see SL as an alternative or substitute for RL, I see SL as an extension of my RL'. Even those like Ashley who role-play extensively in their Second Life activity seem to revert to a strict realism when they come to church, frequenting only religious communities they would join in "real life" and favouring the activities they would pursue there. The cardinal sin of the Cathedral, the issue about which complaint is most often voiced, is to reject the authentic communication of selves by entering into genuine communication with another Resident and then rebuffing that openness by insulting, snubbing, or disrespecting them, claiming unwarranted spiritual authority over them or showing them insufficient support and appreciation. Community life is predicated on the assumption that the avatar is an extension of the true self of the user, and that rejecting the avatar is a direct and particularly callous mistreatment of the user.

JOINING THE CATHEDRAL: THE VALUE OF ANGLICAN SPACE

Almost all of those I met were attracted to the island not because it answered some general post-modern desire for tradition, but because it offered a space to meet Anglicans with whom they expected to share considerable common ground. Even Rachel, the Scottish witch, was attracted to this Anglican identity: 'the fact it was "anglican"sounds stupid...but i didn't want born again yanks annoying me:-)'. Here's another quote, from my interview with Diane:

Interviewer: how did you come across the cathedral?

Diane : Search for Anglican, if I remember

Interviewer: why did you run that search?

Diane : The Episcopal Church is very important in my life

Diane : and when I was thinking of things of interest to search on, it just naturally came up within the first 5 or so

Unlike the other online churches I have studied, where members explained they had sought out that space to satisfy their curiosity or to meet particular religious needs, the interviews I conducted with Cathedral-goers indicated that any spiritual benefits were often unexpected. Their primary purpose in searching for church spaces online was simply to find Anglicans in Second Life, like-minded people they could associate with. June, one of the most active congregants at the Cathedral during my research there, is a good example:

Interviewer: so what made you look for anglican sims?

June : because I'm an Episcopalian

June : and I did wonder if there would be a chance to chat with people from elsewhere

June : whether I would get a different take on what's happening

June : I didn't come here looking for a church. I have one of those in rl

June : I came for a place to meet people

Three other motives for coming to the Cathedral were also important. The first has been discussed above – the occasional appearance of griefers, visiting the community to protest perceived grievances with Christianity or simply to enjoy causing offence. Role-players are similar in this respect, visiting the Cathedral in search of a space to play out a particular identity in a context where local regulars will respond predictably to the play.

The second category concerns prayer: it is not uncommon for people to visit the Cathedral seeking some specific spiritual benefit like a space to pray in a time of trouble. This may not require regular return visits, attendance at services or time for conversation, so

such visitors might easily have escaped notice during my times of participant observation. Rachel is one example, visiting the island to experience the ancient “energy” she feels the builders fused into the environment with their love for their work. Other visitors come to the island for a conversation or a prayer request, seeking a community of Christians to help with a specific time of need, and I heard about such visits from some of the regulars who had encountered them. Several interviewees reported conversations with troubled sex-gamers, for example, visiting the site to ask advice on some particular task they had been ordered to perform.

The third and final category is more rare, but very influential in Second Life religion. I encountered a significant number of people visiting the Cathedral looking for a virtual space to carry out what they perceive to be a calling to mission or evangelism, to preach, lead, create, teach or reach the “unsaved”, pursuing a missional identity which is highly valued but seldom achieved in “real-world” Christian spaces. Community response to these self-appointed missionaries tended to be somewhat mixed. Some were highly regarded for their contributions to community relationships, and indeed most churches and Christian groups I encountered were founded by someone who had joined Second Life just to perform that task. Others were endlessly moved on from one church to another as they tried again and again to achieve positions of authority for which existing church leaders consider them unsuited.

CONCLUSION

Second Life religion shows many distinctive features not found in the Church of Fools, i-church or St Pixels. Second Life is a world with its own cultures, customs and practices, and churches built there must adapt to suit or resist that context. The Cathedral also shows some distinctive features of its own, derived from specific decisions and personalities: the decision to launch a church without financial support was made possible by the economics of Second Life, but the choices to create an Anglican Cathedral, without any endorsement by the Anglican Church, and then to seek such endorsement after the community had matured, were made by particular leaders with their own unique motivations.

Those structural features set this church apart from the others I have studied, and will continue to develop over time as stronger and more organized links and control systems are established. At the same time, however, the Cathedral shows many of the same themes that we have observed in those earlier chapters. Familiarity is just as crucial to architecture and liturgical design as it was for Church of Fools. Control and finance operate quite differently, but are still central problems requiring detailed attention. Interviews and observations show regular members forming strong friendships, a sense of belonging, and commitment to serving the community, helping one another and welcoming newcomers. The congregation is diverse, but overwhelmingly Christian and engaged with local churches. There are sermons here, but – just as in all the other online churches discussed so far – official teaching is broad and uncontroversial, poses no challenge to the diversity of the group, and plays a far less important role in group life than community engagement, open discussion and prayer. This is a unique, different, yet very recognisable kind of online religion.

The accounts offered by the individuals I interviewed in Second Life strongly suggest that the practice of regularly visiting the Cathedral should best be understood as participating in a kind of social network, a space for friendship in Second Life to supplement and deepen “real-life” churchgoing. Spiritual benefits from this networking are marked and important, but are integrated into and continuous with “real-life” churchgoing and grounded on appreciation of the merits of the local Cathedral community. As this interpretation would predict, almost everyone interviewed during the project saw the Cathedral primarily as a space of community. The social gathering of the Cathedral is marked, however, by an openness to newcomers with specific motivations quite different from those of the regular community. Through this social network, with its strikingly beautiful and highly popular architectural space, this gathering of Anglican Christians comes into regular contact with those who wish to learn from them, pray with them, make fun of them, teach them and, occasionally, perhaps, join them.

CHAPTER FIVE: LIFECHURCH.TV

I woke up one morning and googled some stuff about church and some stuff about God, because I needed something different, I was starting to search again, and I came across Church Online, and it was about 3 o'clock in the morning, and I cracked a beer open and I see this chat thing going on, and I see there's live music playing to the left, and I just sat and listened to it and it was beautiful, it was really beautiful, really engaging, and I went over at the end and I logged on and I kept saying to myself what on earth am I doing, I'm sharing with people on some chat thing, these could be anybody, and I started to talk with [the Campus Pastor]. I felt as if I was breaking down [...] I finished the beer and went to bed, and I know people say this but I woke up the next morning and I was a different guy.³⁰¹

William, an Irish man living in Barcelona

Right now we're reaching tens of thousands, by next year I believe it will be hundreds of thousands, and before long I honestly believe it will be millions and millions of people.

Craig Groeschel, Senior Pastor, LifeChurch.tv

INTRODUCTION

Unlike every other church studied in this thesis, LifeChurch.tv has a physical location. 'Church Online' is not an independent online community but the online ministry of a single large church founded in the United States in 1996. In fact, LifeChurch.tv – the '.tv' is part of the name of the church, not just its website address – has 13 different physical locations or 'campuses' at the time of writing, 8 in Oklahoma and 1 each in Arizona, Florida, New York, Tennessee and Texas. Senior Pastor Craig Groeschel speaks from his base in Oklahoma City, standing on stage beneath three giant video screens. Every other campus is identical in every respect, except that Pastor Craig is not actually there. Cameras record his words and a technical team broadcast these live to the other campuses, where the same giant screens show

³⁰¹ Bobby Gruenewald, 'Why Church Online?', Swerve, 13-08 2009. <http://swerve.lifechurch.tv/2009/08/13/why-church-online/>. Accessed 10-01 10.

him pacing the stage and speaking to his audience. Each campus has its own worship band, campus pastor, small groups, children's and youth ministries and mission projects.

'Church Online' has brought this campus model to the Internet, broadcasting music and Groeschel's messages with a constellation of communication options around that central content. Viewers can chat, talk to the online pastor, pray with volunteers, join small groups and go on online missions. They can visit LifeChurch in Second Life, read blogs and follow updates to Facebook. This is only one part of LifeChurch's online work; other websites encourage visitors to download free content for their local churches, review archives of old sermons, study the Bible and more. The 'online campus' idea is now offered by scores of other large churches across the United States,³⁰² a new movement in online religion that has started to gather congregations rivalling the 3D days of Church of Fools.

We see here a very different kind of online church from those discussed before. Church Online is larger, more controlled, less relational and more evangelistic than my other four case studies, and differs significantly on every one of the seven themes I identified. Church Online suggests new possibilities for online church-building, rooted in and expanding the influence of powerful local churches to a global religious stage. If online campuses continue to grow, their pastors may become a new generation of celebrity preachers, delivering compelling messages with sophisticated multi-media production, supported by well-funded, well-trained teams of web designers and online community managers. Large churches have long sought to expand their public profile and share the story of their success through books, music, conferences and television shows, and through digital media they can communicate more material, in more diverse forms, more frequently to more people than ever before.

LIFECHURCH AND 'CHURCH ONLINE'

³⁰² According to the Leadership Network, 42 different churches in the United States had set up their own online campus by November 2009. See 'Churches with an Internet Campus', <http://digital.leadnet.org/2007/10/churches-with-a.html>. Accessed 10-01-10.

LifeChurch.tv has much in common with the “New Paradigm” churches discussed by Donald Miller,³⁰³ and with the “Appropriators” identified a decade later by Miller and Richard Flory.³⁰⁴ Both categories are characterised by the appropriation of elements of style and organization from secular culture. According to Miller and Flory, such churches adapt their environments and practices to abandon whatever might be alienating in their dress, words, music, worship or lifestyles but emphasizing the personal, life-changing challenge of their religious message. Sermons focus on relationship with God, not doctrinal conformity, and the senior pastor sets out a clear vision for the church but gives great autonomy to lay leaders. Small group fellowship is strongly encouraged. All of these features can be found in LifeChurch, which has attracted much attention³⁰⁵ for its innovations – particularly its use of the Internet.

Like many churches, LifeChurch.tv began by designing a website where sermons could be watched online. That early online work was limited in ambition, but soon began to develop in more innovative directions. As one staff member explained to me, they ‘kept getting stories’ from people watching those messages online. ‘We realised God was using that’, and decided to follow that guidance by creating some kind of community space, an ‘Internet Campus’, around that online content. ‘The Internet Campus gives us the opportunity to be part of what God is doing’.

This ‘Internet Campus’, launched in 2006, reproduced almost every aspect of the LifeChurch system online. Visitors were able to watch one of two worship channels recorded at local campuses, watch Groeschel’s message of the week and join online small groups and mission trips. Brandon Donaldson, the staff member I quoted above, had worked for LifeChurch as a youth pastor before leaving to take a masters degree in computer science. In his own words, he combined ‘the heart of a pastor’ with the technical skills and experience needed to ‘talk the language’ with web developers. He was invited back to LifeChurch to

³⁰³ Donald Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism : Christianity in the New Millennium* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1997)

³⁰⁴ Richard Flory and Donald Miller, *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2008)

³⁰⁵ LifeChurch was named “America’s Most Innovative Church” by Outreach Magazine in 2007 and 2008; see Kent Shaffer, ‘America’s 25 Most Innovative Churches of 2008’, ChurchRelevance.com, 04-01 2008. <http://churchrelevance.com/americas-25-most-innovative-churches-of-2008/>. Accessed 10-01 10.

become the new Internet Campus Pastor, managing the project, speaking to his online congregation as part of each Experience, engaging in pastoral work one-on-one with some of those visiting the site, and delivering video and blog messages through the week.

When I first interviewed Brandon Donaldson, he explained the careful adherence of Internet Campus to offline ideas as a kind of theological humility: ‘we don’t want to do anything outside what you’re already doing, God.’ He also observed that the 24-hour connectivity and user-generated content of the Internet could be ‘scary to churches’, and suggested that forum discussions were too difficult to moderate and direct; reproducing an offline model that had been proven to work offered a safe way to avoid these pitfalls.

Donaldson referred to the Internet as a ‘tool’, and explained that LifeChurch tried to take that tool and ask, ‘How can we use this for the glory of God?’. This concept of ‘tools’ was a recurring theme in interviews with staff and volunteers, referring to strategies, media and even people that could be used to achieve core mission aims. This perception of the Internet as ‘tool’, rather than a space or culture, is one of the most striking differences between LifeChurch and the other churches I have studied. A ‘tool’ is used for a purpose, and may be used more or less effectively; there is no ‘right’ or ‘culturally appropriate’ way to use it, merely the way best suited for the desired goal.

We see here a clear counter-example or qualification to some existing research examining religion and the Internet. Christopher Helland argues that ‘religion online’ is characterised by perception of the Internet as a ‘tool’, rather than ‘an environment for sharing religious beliefs and practices’,³⁰⁶ but LifeChurch.tv sees ‘online religion’ itself as a kind of tool. Heidi Campbell claims to discern four common discourse strategies in religious discussion of the Internet, describing it as ‘a spiritual medium facilitating religious experience, a sacramental space suitable for religious use, a tool promoting religion or

³⁰⁶ Christopher Helland, "Surfing for Salvation," *Religion* 32, no. 4 (2002). p295. See also ———, "Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 01, no. 1 (2005).

religious practice and a technology for affirming religious life'³⁰⁷; this discussion is helpful, but LifeChurch shows that these discourses can be combined and blended in complex ways.

Over time, LifeChurch has moved away from copying its successful offline model in favour of more context-driven engagement with the unique potential of the Internet, signalled by a change of name in 2009 from 'Internet Campus' to 'Church Online'. LifeChurch was ready 'to grow to that next level' of scale and commitment, Donaldson said, and needed to find new models to achieve that aim. Church Online features a much more active blog, continual proliferation of Experience times toward an eventual goal of 50 every week, and appropriation of a whole range of online tools and social networks. The Internet Campus initially offered no synchronous communication during the Experience, and invited viewers to enter a set of small chatrooms afterwards. This was intended to replace the social interaction found after an Experience in the lobby area of a local campus. A second design tried to reproduce the idea of sitting next to friends, and allowed visitors to compile a 'Friends in Your Row' list of specified people they would be able to talk to during Experiences. Church Online dispensed with this caution altogether and placed an open chatroom, no registration necessary, directly alongside the Experience broadcast window.

According to a Church Online blog post from June 2009,³⁰⁸ an online congregation can be counted in two ways. Recording the total number of different computers connecting to each Experience would include even the briefest connections, so LifeChurch also records the highest number of simultaneous connections during the Experience and offers both statistics for comparison. The former is referred to as "visits", and the latter as "attendance". Actual viewer numbers may be considerably higher: "these are just computer connections, not "people." In general we have come to find that 1=1.5 people in regards to these statistics.' The blog author offers no justification for this assumption, which would be almost impossible to test.

³⁰⁷ Heidi Campbell, "Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 01, no. 1 (2005). p9-10, 12.

³⁰⁸ Tony Steward, 'YTD State of Church Online', Church Online Blog <http://internet.lifechurch.tv/2009/06/ytd-state-of-church-online/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

According to this blog post, “attendance” in May 2009 stood at 4200 per week, up from 1900 in January. In the first 5 months of the year, over 3000 online “salvations” had been recorded – a key feature of Church Online that will be discussed below. There are 198 countries in the world, and computers were connecting to Church Online Experiences from 140 countries each week.

Brandon Donaldson has shared annual statistics for 2008 and 2009 with me, and these chart Church Online’s growth in more detail. 980 Experiences were held online in 2009, assisted by 175 volunteers, up from 300 and 50 respectively in 2008. The number of “salvations” had risen from 4000 to 8600. Over 1500 follow-up packages were mailed in 2009 to people answering a “salvation” call. “Attendance” had risen from 50,000 to well over 200,000. The total number of different computers connecting to Experiences during the year rose from 320,000 in 2008 to over 1.2 million in 2009.

The new features introduced to Church Online are used to enrich the Experience, enhance communication with and between viewers, and publicise LifeChurch through viewers’ own networks of contacts on sites like Facebook and MySpace. A branch of Church Online has also been established in Second Life. This chapter will discuss each of four key issues – the Experience, Second Life, LifeGroups, and online missions – after explanation of some specific research methods. The term ‘Church Online’ will be preferred in this chapter, with ‘Internet Campus’ used only when comments refer specifically to activity before 2009.

METHODS AND SOURCES

The community forming at Church Online is quite different in structure, style and activity from others I have studied, and tightly focused on broadcasting, supervised conversation and authorised small groups. No synchronous or asynchronous space is offered where church visitors can communicate with one another outside Experience times or in an unsupervised way. There are no forums, no private messages, and the chatroom is only open at specific times. Church Online is also a far busier space than any other church I have

studied, attracting hundreds or thousands of visitors to each of an ever-increasing number of Experiences, and I rarely encounter the same individuals more than once.

These factors make it difficult to identify and build rapport with possible interview partners. It would be inappropriate to introduce a research project during the actual Experience, and attempts to solicit interviews during brief encounters afterwards proved largely unsuccessful. The volunteers who attend each service were much easier to communicate with. I was able to develop long-term contact with several volunteers and found them excellent interviewees, highly motivated to discuss their work. Additional stories and accounts have been gathered through a snowball approach, asking some of these highly-connected volunteers to recommend other individuals who represent particular categories of membership I considered interesting or important. Some contacts were also made through Facebook and in LifeGroups.

Church staff proved less responsive than the volunteers. They were usually too busy for a chatroom question or email about sociological research to attract their attention, but other forms of contact were more successful. I frequently used the 'Live Chat' function, explained below, to establish one-on-one communication during Experiences and found these conversations informative and helpful. I was also able to visit the offices of Church Online in Oklahoma in October 2008 to interview members of the Campus team, see them at work, tour some of the physical campuses and attend a number of Experiences in person.

I interviewed 27 individuals during this case study, speaking face-to-face, by telephone, by email and in Second Life. Only 8 had no leadership role. 8 were paid staff, 6 were leaders of small groups, and the rest were volunteers tasked with prayer, welcoming visitors and moderation duties.

One final note is required. The term 'member' has special significance in LifeChurch, referring to those who have committed to specific forms of voluntary and financial work for

the church,³⁰⁹ and no general term for those who attend the church emerged during my observations. The word ‘visitor’ will be used in this chapter to refer to any occasional or regular attender of LifeChurch Experiences.

‘BEHIND THE CURTAIN’, A LIFECHURCH WORSHIP EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

We now begin our discussion of the online campus itself, demonstrating the major features of Church Online through a detailed description of one recent Experience.

Experiences are absolutely central for Church Online and form the only point of contact with LifeChurch.tv for a high proportion of visitors. This section of the chapter will be lengthy and detailed, interspersing descriptions with analysis of key patterns and themes and quotes from interviews and other sources. The specific Experience I have chosen to describe discussed the goals and vision of Church Online, so I will also use this section to introduce the ideas and aims that underlie this online ministry.

Several images reproduced here are screenshots from a previous series, ‘At the Movies’, but show the same structure and representative examples of video and dialogue. Quotes from chat postings are included, with original spelling preserved and usernames removed. The structure of Church Online is such that any chatroom contributions are visible to hundreds or thousands of anonymous viewers; given this highly public setting, I have not attempted to secure consent from each contributor for the quotes I use here. This decision is discussed further in my Methods chapter.

³⁰⁹ “Membership” has now been renamed “Partnership”. See Brandon Donaldson, ‘Partnership at LifeChurch.tv’, 08-01 2008. <http://internet.lifechurch.tv/2008/01/partnership-at-lifechurchtv/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

In January 2010, LifeChurch holds ten Experiences each Sunday. Two take place at 1000 and 2200 GMT, and the remainder at 0700, 0830, 1000, 1130, 1300, 1730, 2000 and 2200 CT (Central Time). The visitor could also find an Experience at 27 other times during the week.³¹⁰ On this particular occasion, 9th August 2009, I attended at 1130 CT, or 1730 UK time. Only one Experience, on Saturday evening, offers an actual live feed, with the remainder throughout the week repeating that one recording. Most content is automated, but certain tasks like starting the video feed must still be carried out manually. Trained Experience teams have been formed for this task, each comprising an ‘Experience Captain’ and a group of volunteers to welcome and pray with visitors. One Church Online blog post from May 2009 announces three new Experience times, and encourages readers to consider stepping forward to help with more: ‘if you see these experiences getting launched and God is stirring your heart to do the same, be sure to click here and let us know. We can walk you through all the details and help you to launch and own your own experience.’³¹¹

The Experience on 9th August was the first of a new series, ‘Behind the Curtain’, a three-week set of events describing the vision underlying the digital ministries of LifeChurch.tv and introducing a new fund-raising website, ‘Digital Missions’.³¹² Experiences fall into series of three or four weeks, themed around some issue from the Bible or contemporary life.³¹³ Previous series included ‘Elijah’, treating this biblical figure as a source of wisdom on stability and courage: ‘When the world around us is spinning out of control, where do we turn?’. ‘Can You See Him?’ invited visitors to ‘join LifeChurch.tv as we discover how to see God in everything’, while ‘Life. Money. Hope’ invited the ‘financial expert’ Dave Ramsey ‘to share timeless advice on the money matters right under your own roof.’ Other series, like ‘Practical Atheist’, ‘You Don’t Have What It Takes’ and ‘Satan’s Sex Ed’, promised bold and challenging teaching that would openly discuss issues many churches shied away from. A particular highlight of each church year is ‘At the Movies’, an annual series using Hollywood movies to introduce issues of faith.

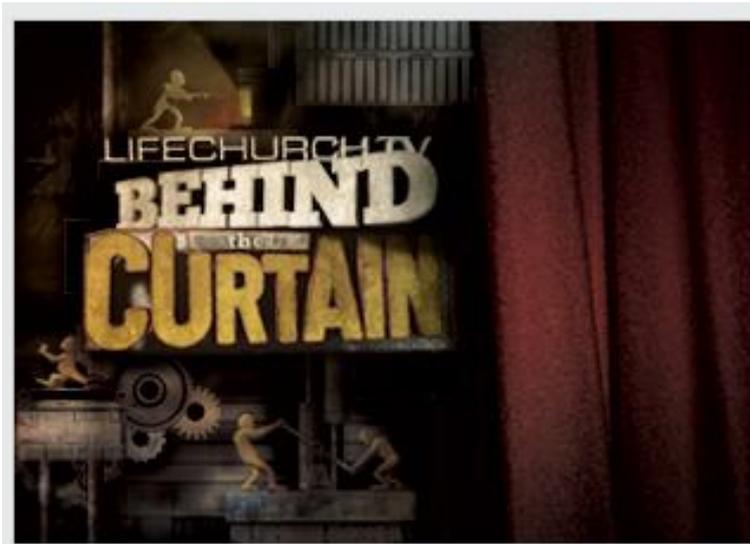
³¹⁰ ‘Times’, <http://internet.lifechurch.tv/times/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

³¹¹ Tony Steward, ‘Launching 3 New Church Online Experiences in May!’, Church Online Blog <http://internet.lifechurch.tv/2009/05/launching-3-new-church-online-experiences-in-may/>

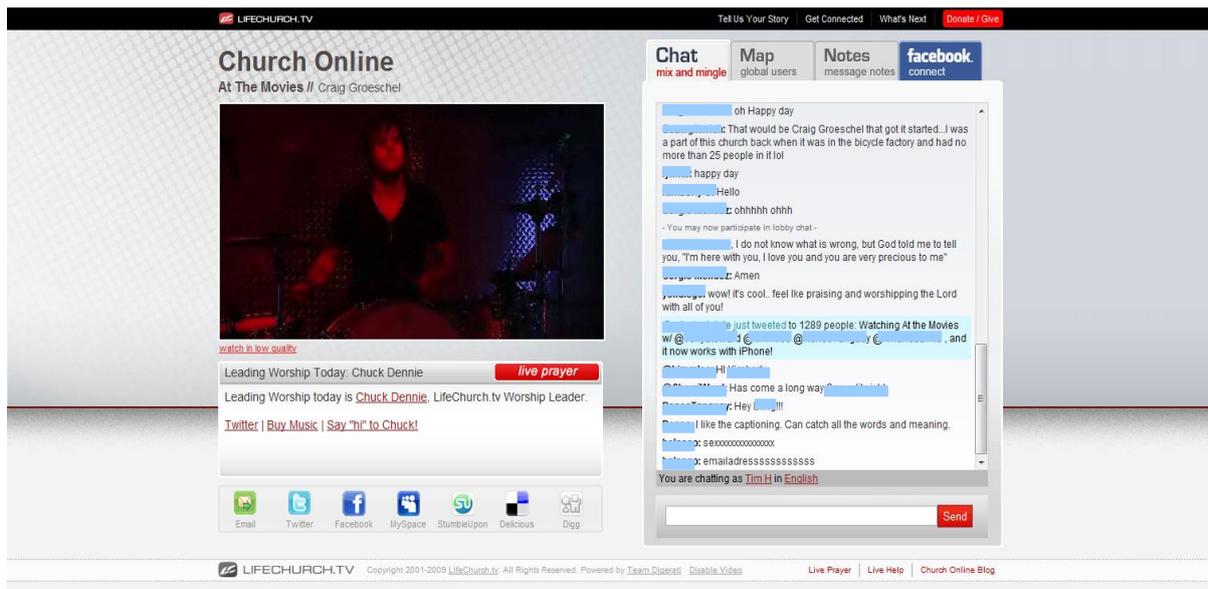
³¹² ‘Digital Missions’, <http://www.lifechurch.tv/giving/digital-missions>. Accessed 10-01-10.

³¹³ ‘Message Archive’, <http://www.lifechurch.tv/message-archive>. Accessed 10-01-10.

Each series is heavily promoted in the preceding weeks and illustrated with elaborate and visually striking posters and graphics. The trailer video created for ‘Behind the Curtain’ shows something of the talent that these productions involve; a series of animated figures run, hammer and engineer their way through a giant machine landscape, symbolising LifeChurch and the hidden work the message series will uncover.



The main screen of ‘Church Online’ shows two inset windows, one displaying the video broadcast and the other showing one of a series of tabs. These tabs include a chat window, a global map marking the location of each computer connection and a set of talk notes to annotate and share by email. Chat is easy to join, requiring no log-in or registration; the visitor simply types in whatever name they wish to use during that session, and could easily select another for their next visit. Volunteers frequently remind viewers that anyone unduly distracted by the conversations in the chat window can hide it: ‘remember if the chat becomes distracting you can click on the video to watch in full screen’.



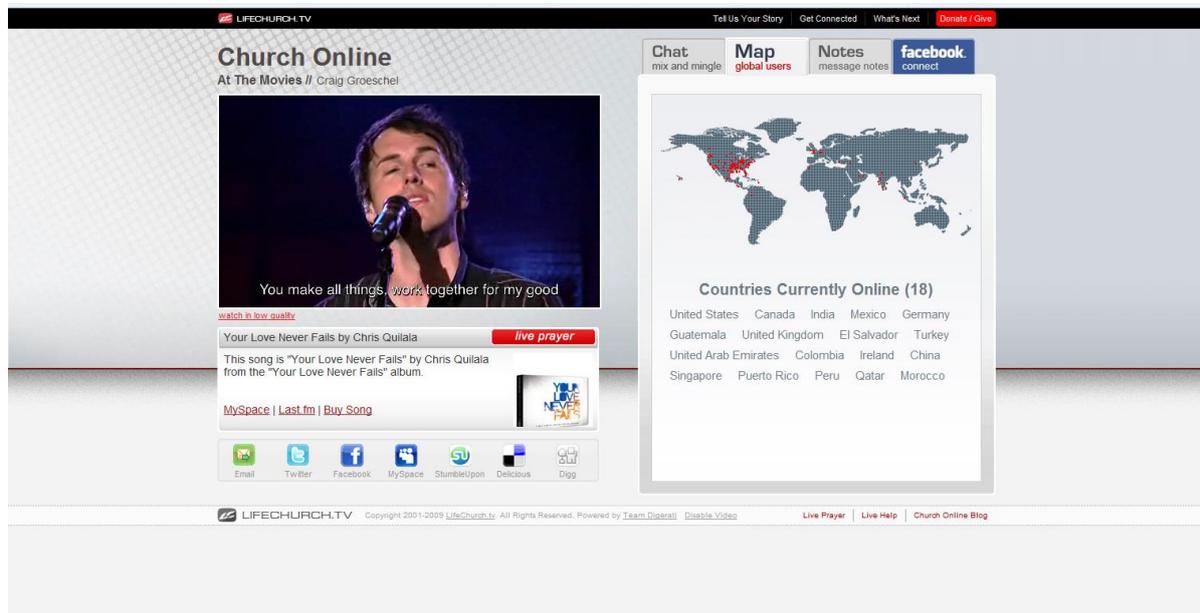
The Facebook tab was first launched in April 2009, developed in collaboration with Facebook for the Experiences to be held that Easter, and returned for the ‘At the Movies’ series shown in this screenshot.³¹⁴ The function encourages members to use the social network site to advertise their LifeChurch membership and activity, and lets anyone viewing the Experience see these updates as they are posted. Messages include simple statements like ‘--- is watching LifeChurch.tv’, more personal remarks like ‘Powerful prayer is happening for me now at live.lifechurch.tv’, and direct requests for prayer.

Icons beneath the video window expand this function with connections to popular social network and bookmark sites, including Facebook, Digg, del.icio.us and MySpace. Twitter posts are fed directly into the main chat stream to show who has posted a message, what that message reads, and how many followers have received it. A suggested message is pre-scripted, so the visitor can update their Facebook status, send out a tweet and so on just by clicking that button and entering their username and password. The structure of the site not only allows visitors to invite others but allows viewers to see that invitations are being sent, a visual record of the success of the church at appropriating technology for its evangelistic goals and an inspiration to other viewers to send out their own invitations.

³¹⁴Bobby Gruenewald, ‘Bring Your Friends on Facebook to Church’, <http://swerve.lifechurch.tv/2009/04/07/bring-your-facebook-friends-to-church/>

One new function of the chat space has broadened the global reach of LifeChurch.tv. In June 2009, LifeChurch announced the launch of a ‘group chat tool’ called babelwith.me, using Google Translate to enable visitors to communicate with one another in 45 languages.³¹⁵ Non-English speakers are now able to take part in chat conversations. One German-speaker I interviewed had no need for translations, but was positive about their potential: ‘I do think that it's useful for people who hardly speak English - also for the English speakers talking to those people. The translations can get a bit funny, but the message gets across. That's the main point.’ These translated contributions, in my own experience, are rarely entirely comprehensible. Mangled postings like ‘so all tontois (Spanish: tan tontois todos)’, from the transcript recorded on the 9th, are not uncommon.

By 1745 on the 9th, the map tab shows connections from North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia. The United States is represented, of course, but also the United Kingdom, Russia, India, China, Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, South Africa and 17 others.



i) WORSHIP

³¹⁵ Bobby Gruenewald, ‘Communicate in 45 Languages with New Group Chat Tool’, <http://swerve.lifechurch.tv/category/babelwithme/>

The Experience on the 9th begins, as always, with music. Prior to the launch of Church Online the Internet Campus offered two different worship streams for viewers to choose from, but giving only one option ensures that all those commenting in the chat space are responding to the same words, music and visuals. Streams are occasionally recorded specifically for Church Online, as in Figure Two, but most commonly replay worship performed at one of the local campuses. On this occasion a guest worship leader is introduced, Aaron Keyes, and those watching in the chatroom respond warmly:

listen to the words of this song. Let the truth of it wash over you.
he gets deep into his songs
He has amazing lyrics
Listen to how God loves us!
Let this song wash over you - this is a powerful message from God's heart to ours.

As the screenshots above show, the space beneath the window is used to offer a range of other interaction options. The viewer can read the title of the song, its original singer and the album from which it comes, click a link to buy their own copy from Amazon, or use MySpace and Last.fm to find more music by the artist.

Some of my interviewees were indifferent to the worship sessions, focusing instead on LifeChurch preaching. One much preferred listening to country music in his car. Others, however, were more enthusiastic. Anthony, a young man from Wales who also attended a local Pentecostal church, explained ‘it feels exactly the same as being in a church... after a while you don’t even see the monitor... it’s just the worship leader taking you into the presence of God.’ ‘I tend to sing a lot’, he confessed, waking up his parents, but he didn’t often dance – there wasn’t enough space around his computer desk.

ii) VIDEO SEGUE

The musical segment lasts fifteen minutes, and is followed by the first of a series of video segments. This first of these was recorded in England and shows a Church Online volunteer describing some of her experiences of LifeChurch. In the second, Brandon Donaldson introduces the customary ‘offering’ or request for donations through a story of online success. Two volunteers, he claims, have recently used their Facebook statuses to advertise a LifeChurch experience. A homeless man they did not know somehow stumbled across that message, followed it to LifeChurch, and asked for prayer. By chance, he was allocated to the very volunteer whose status message he had seen, and he later emailed her to declare that his life had been utterly changed by their encounter. ‘God is on the move!’, Brandon insists, claiming that stories like this were clear proof of God’s work through LifeChurch.

This anecdote is one illustration of the central role of volunteers in Church Online. Beneath the video window in Figure 1, a small red box reads ‘Live Prayer’. Clicking on this box sends the viewer to a form, into which he or she must enter a name and some details about the help they require, and this form is forwarded immediately to one of a number of volunteers standing by with access to one-to-one chat software. This system is identical to that used by some customer service websites, and enables anyone seeking prayer to enter a private conversation with someone authorised and supported by LifeChurch. These conversations are confidential, but anonymous anecdotes regularly turn up in LifeChurch material. ‘Live Prayer’ was previously named ‘Live Chat’, with a broader scope including technical support, and as I noted above it proved a far more reliable contact channel for communication with church staff than email or telephone calls.

Chat contributors direct viewers to Live Prayer throughout the Experience, working from an apparent assumption that the public space is inappropriate as a space for prayer. Contributors post general warnings and advice – ‘This song brings up a lot of feelings and emotions, if you need prayer, click the live prayer button under the video’ – or responses to specific individuals. ‘Hi.I really need a prayer!!!!’, posts one visitor. ‘click on the live prayer button under the video’, a volunteer quickly replies, ‘we would love to pray with you.’ When one poster announces that she wants to die and ‘go home’, two contributors repeatedly direct her away from the public space: ‘click on live prayer and someone would love to talk to you

one on one’, ‘... I hope you'll go to live prayer and let someone pray with you’. The highly public nature of the chat space and the very fragmented nature of the conversation there may be factors influencing this pressure toward private communication, which does not parallel anything I have observed in the other churches I studied. Posts in the main chat window may attract a dozen unconnected responses or none at all; more sustained, focused conversation is perhaps considered better suited to personal prayer.

This insistence on privacy was not universal, with other contributors posting supportive comments, theological reflections, and their email addresses. One, for example, writes, ‘Taking one's life only hurts those left behind...think how yor mother might feel. God never moves so you must be moving around too fast for him to keep up with you. Slow down, take some time and listen hard for His words - he led you to this chat line so that is a start.’ One of the images above shows a rare example of what appears to be a kind of chatroom prophecy, posted during the earlier series ‘At The Movies’: ‘[name], I do not know what is wrong, but God told me to tell you, ‘I’m here with you, I love you and you are very precious to me.’

iii) THE MESSAGE

The talk begins at 1750, with a fifteen-second video introducing the series ‘Behind the Curtain’. A set of animated figures run on treadmills and pump handles to turn giant cogs and whirring machinery, powering great iron arms punching each word of the logo into place – a graphic representation of the work going on behind the scenes at LifeChurch.

The head pastor, Craig Groeschel, now appears centre screen looking directly into the camera. He wears a casual, open-necked shirt with cufflinks, smart jacket and jeans, with a hands-free microphone clipped to his ear. Only two camera angles are used, either full-length or half-length shots of the pastor, but no footage of the congregation. He welcomes his listeners, including all categories of his audience:

Well, welcome today to all of our campuses, all of our Network Churches, we love you guys, and with us now at Church Online, we're so glad to have you with us, and I am super glad to be back teaching today... I really feel a deep passion to help engage our whole church to understand all the different resources that are available for us to do ministry, and I pray that you'll get a passion and a deeper understanding of what is possible.

'Network Churches' are located around the world, using free LifeChurch resources and video teaching to organise ministries loosely connected to LifeChurch.tv.

'A lot of people', Groeschel claimed, 'are not rejecting God so much as they are rejecting church'. This declaration was illustrated with a story from his own ministry experience about a young man who died after rejecting efforts to interest him in Christ. The vision of LifeChurch, Groeschel reminds his listeners, is 'to lead people to become fully devoted followers of Christ'. All the campuses are asked to repeat those words aloud.

Reading Luke 24:45-47, Pastor Craig relates that after Jesus was 'raised from the dead', Jesus spoke to his disciples and 'Scripture says, 'Jesus opened their minds so that they could understand the Scripture''. 'That's exactly what's going to happen to some of you today, your minds are going to be opened to spiritual truth.' As he speaks, the verses appear as subtitles on the viewer's video screen. Many churches around the world do not even preach 'to their own neighbourhoods', but 'this must change!' – 'We must do anything short of sin to reach people for Christ'. This series will draw back the 'curtain' to show some of the tools and strategies LifeChurch has been developing for that goal. 'I want to really tell you what's going on in my heart, what's going on in my life, and where I believe God is taking us as a church.'

This introduction, lasting some four minutes, demonstrates key aspects of Pastor Craig's preaching style. Certain structural elements are very consistent, including his relaxed-yet-smart style of dress and the restricted range of camera shots. Craig takes care to speak straight to camera, establishing eye contact with the viewer – just enough, never too much – to reinforce key messages and maintain a sense of direct personal address. Cameras are sited near the centre of the auditorium, allowing Groeschel to shift his gaze from congregation to viewer in a relaxed and natural way. The overall effect that LifeChurch strives for is one of near-transparency, the illusion of presence and direct communication; every viewer in every campus must feel as though Groeschel speaks directly to them. This contrasts strikingly with Christian television preaching, where audience reactions are often shown; here, there is to be no division between those physically present and those watching from afar, no sense that those watching the broadcast are separate from the 'real' audience. I interviewed the LifeChurch Innovations Pastor, Bobby Gruenewald, in Oklahoma, and he emphasised the importance of this strategy:

we don't take shots of the crowd, which in a television ministry context is what you always do, because in television you want to show people that you're a big church and lots of people care, but in a video teaching context you're not trying to remind people that the video's in a different place, you're trying to suspend disbelief that this is happening somewhere else and you create this concept that this is happening right where you're at.

As one of the churchgoers I met in Oklahoma explained, any shot of the audience would give a sense that 'you're watching someone else's church'. In fact, he claimed, video teaching was much more effective than a face-to-face message: every viewer feels Groeschel is talking directly to them, looking into their eyes, but in a crowd it is much easier to lose concentration and hide from the challenge.

The content of this message shows other typical features, including extensive use of anecdotes taken from Groeschel's own ministry – anonymous, but still intensely personal – and the promise to reveal honest truths about his own 'heart' and life. Donald Miller

identified this as one of the common features of “New Paradigm” churches: ‘pastors tend to be understated, humble, and self-revealing.’³¹⁶ The confident personal challenge is another central technique, shown here with the bold claim that some of those in the audience will be ‘opened’ to ‘spiritual truth’ through the message. The role of Scripture is typical, with a small number of short, simple passages introduced as biblical foundation for a message that is never merely expository; the verses introduced are used to underline a particular challenge for the listener, supported and illustrated by stories, remembered experiences and video testimonies. The vision of the church is captured and conveyed in a series of repeated slogans and sayings, and some – such as the key vision statement regarding building fully committed disciples – have become so embedded in church discourse that they recur as spontaneous contributions in the interviews I have conducted with staff and members.

These features of Groeschel’s preaching were highlighted time and again in my interviews. Bridget, for example, praised ‘the blatant honesty’ of the LifeChurch preaching, claiming Groeschel ‘doesn’t pull any punches’ when showing how much God demands we change our lives. Christina in Austria explained by email that a good church must be ‘real, relevant and relatable’. A ‘real’ pastor ‘is himself all the time, above all when teaching’. Relevance ‘means practical teaching that is useful for my day-to-day life and that doesn’t just speak about evangelism, missions or spiritual gifts’, and relatability ‘pertains to teaching as well as people. Pastor and congregation should teach and act in a way that helps Christians and non-Christians alike relate to them. (Addressing current issues might help, as might modern worship and using video and internet.)’. According to Christina ‘a church like that is impossible to find in Austria, both in real life and online’, but LifeChurch suited her perfectly.

Groeschel’s introduction also shows something of the attitude of LifeChurch to leadership. The ideal LifeChurch member is presented as highly committed and engaged with personal Christian mission work but not engaged at all with shaping church vision and strategy. This contrasts dramatically with the other churches studied, which all emphasised the role of lay initiative in generating ideas. Finally, we see something of the communal self-

³¹⁶ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, p20

understanding promoted by Pastor Craig: LifeChurch is a valuable tool for the work of God, blessed by God and driven by God.

Groeschel went on to define ‘church’ as an outwardly focused community, basing this understanding on Scripture and an etymology of the Greek word ‘ekklesia’, ‘the called-out ones’. He attacks those who demand ‘a church that meets my needs’. A new slogan appears: ‘The Church’s message never changes, but its methods must change’. Each subtitle throughout the talk appears in a graphic designed to continue the visual theme of the series, with clear white lettering set against an iron bar with whirling cogs at either end. This philosophy is vital, because ‘the way people relate is changing by the second’, particularly through technology. Groeschel describes letter-writing, mobile phones, Facebook, and Twitter, telling jokes and pausing for audience laughter. His conclusion is sombre: ‘To reach people today we must change the way we do things, or we’re going to lose an entire generation. That’s why, here’s one of the key behind the scenes thoughts that we talk about all the time, and I want us all to embrace this – if you’re taking notes, write this down, it’s so important – here it is: to reach people that no one is reaching, you have to do things that no one is doing.’

Further key features of Groeschel’s preaching appear here. His attitude to learning and scholarship is not dissimilar to his use of the Bible, with one or two brief illustrations introduced into the talk where appropriate to support the core message. Greek terms are not uncommon but serve the main purpose of the talk, which is not the study of the Bible for its own sake but the presentation of direct personal challenge to the lives and thinking of the audience. The challenge is conveyed rhetorically through a range of tools and strategies, including camerawork – Groeschel again takes care to gaze straight to camera when delivering key points – and a constant shifting of tone. Moments of high tension and demand are introduced and followed by light-hearted and often self-deprecating stories, illustrations and digressions, with the regular lowering of tension serving to restore an atmosphere of comfortable comradeship and the sharp shifts from laughter to intense seriousness reinforcing the impact of the challenge.

Many of these features are highlighted in Helje Kringelbotn Sødal's discussion of Joel Osteen's preaching style, which applies concepts from classical rhetoric to analyse his success. Osteen, like Groeschel, includes many stories from his own life and ministry in his preaching. According to Sødal, these examples serve to persuade, advise and rouse emotions, but also 'to bind Osteen's huge congregation together by including everyone in a common history centred on Osteen's family' and to 'give identity to a church which has a short history.' 'Repetition may lead to recognition and the feeling of being an insider.'³¹⁷ Sødal also suggests limitations to Osteen's success, however, based on the classical idea of "kairos", which could loosely be translated "context". His message seems American in style, she argues, and so may not succeed elsewhere in the world. 'From a rhetorical point of view, this would be quite natural: one cannot deliver the same speech in different social and cultural contexts, because rhetoric is intrinsically contextual.'³¹⁸ If this argument were valid, it would be highly concerning for LifeChurch's attempts to broadcast preaching to a global congregation online, but my interviews and observations showed warm appreciation of Groeschel's preaching from many different countries.

Groeschel now introduces three LifeChurch projects that 'will be controversial for a little while', because anything new is misunderstood, but will eventually become 'some of the best ways to reach people'. 'We will do new things to reach new people, and if that offends you please go someplace else.'

The theme of challenge reappears here. Groeschel is not afraid to encourage his congregation to leave, and any controversial comment he makes will often be introduced by recognition of its difficulty – acknowledging that many in the congregation will struggle with this concept, reminding them that other excellent churches may teach them differently, and suggesting they go elsewhere if they disapprove. This may seem aggressive, but actually conveys inclusiveness: by acknowledging the presence of people who will dislike the teaching, Groeschel admits that LifeChurch is diverse, even while ostensibly reinforcing the image of the church as unified and decisive.

³¹⁷ Helje Kringelbotn Sødal, "'Victor, not Victim': Joel Osteen's Rhetoric of Hope", *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25, no.1 (2010).

³¹⁸ *Ibid.* p48

All three projects are digital. The first is YouVersion, a Bible website and social network site designed by LifeChurch, ‘a great place to interact with God’s word online’. YouVersion has been developed into a mobile phone application, ‘the first of anything like this in history’, and 1.8 million people have downloaded it, a statistic that prompts wild applause from the audience. 5000 downloads are recorded each day, with users spending over half a billion minutes reading their electronic Bibles; 1 in 27 iPhones in the world now run the application. Not only is this a chance to keep a Bible text to hand at all times – ‘I’m not spiritual enough to carry this text around with me all the time, but I am practical enough to keep hold of my phone’ – but ‘I want you to see this as a great tool’ for witnessing. Anyone spotted using an iPhone should be encouraged to download the YouVersion application. Pastor Craig claims he has started conversations with strangers all over the world and never had his offer declined.

In chat, some users respond to these revelations with great enthusiasm. ‘<<holding up hands in thankfulness for our ability to contact the world>>’, writes one; ‘That is incredible indeed’, writes another, ‘God’s word becoming available to everyone’. When Groeschel describes the opportunities offered by YouVersion on a mobile phone, one typed, ‘I have not done that yet...I MUST GET THIS on my phone!! [...] LOVE IT’. Another quickly encourages her: ‘You should [username]...it’s an amazing app...I use it all the time’. Another viewer types out the web link to locate the download.

The second project is LifeChurch.tv’s online sermon archive, offering ‘free messages to anyone with the Internet’: ‘there is something that happens when the truth of God is taught, I don’t know how and I don’t know why, but the truth of God changes lives’. ‘We made an aggressive decision a few years ago that we would not sell God’s teaching’, and following this decision LifeChurch.tv chose to make all messages available free online instead. A new believer could hear new messages every day, Groeschel suggests, or show messages to the friends who could benefit from them most. A video is shown here, recorded by a businessman: ‘making those resources available free online does incredible things’, he

explains, helping him 'do and be church' while travelling. He has shared messages with 'over 100 people'.

Again, chat contributors respond enthusiastically. 'This church is really doind some amazing stuff', one writes; 'this is how God is working in the world', posted another. The concept of offering free messages online receives particularly warm comment: 'Word of God changes lives..Amen'; 'Not for sale... amen'; 'I love it... free'; 'The truth of God is not for sell here [...] It's FREE!!!'. One shares her own experiences: 'The first one I watched when I was lost was Satan's Sex Ed, lol [...] couldn't believe they talked about sex in church, lol'.

The third project, Pastor Craig warns, will be 'despised by many people today and massively accepted by people in the future': Church Online. 'Right now we're reaching tens of thousands, by next year I believe it will be hundreds of thousands, and before long I honestly believe it will be millions and millions of people.' People from 140 countries, he claims, are with us 'right now' in Church Online, and he looks to camera to address those viewers directly: 'I want to welcome you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ', who said that wherever two or three are gathered he would be there with them. 'Even though you are at places all over the world right now, you are gathered together in the name of Christ, and I know that he is with you, and I believe that he is going to speak to you, and by faith I know that you are going to be different.'

YouVersion and the message archive offer opportunities for low-key, unpressured evangelism, and Church Online can also be a witnessing tool. Believers can now invite anyone they meet, anywhere in the world, to join them in church, needing only an Internet connection and a time to meet. Groeschel encourages his audience to join Church Online as volunteers: 'Many of you, you need to see this as your primary ministry, that you're a Church Online evangelist', logging on to share faith. Chat contributors repeat this appeal:

- We can even use people serving who are NOT tech nerds!

- We need tech nerds, social butterflies, administrators, and prayer warriors. Whatever your gift is we have a place for you. Join us.<http://internet.lifechurch.tv/serve/>
- if you love praying for people we could use you!

Many of my interviewees routinely attended the same recorded Experience several times each week to work as volunteers. Anthony, for example, attended the Internet Campus at 9am, went to his local church at 11am, went back to LifeChurch mid-afternoon, and then went to his local church again at 6:30pm. In the mornings, he explained, he was too busy welcoming people to the chatroom to actually listen to what Groeschel was saying. Others claimed that Groeschel's messages were so rich and valuable that they gained new insights with each repeat.

The evangelistic success of Church Online is demonstrated by another video testimony, a webcam conversation between Brandon Donaldson, the Church Online pastor, and a Northern Irish man he is 'personally discipling' on a journey away from organised crime. 'Just because people don't understand this', Pastor Craig concludes, 'does not mean God isn't working'.

One strategy for attracting visitors to Church Online attracts a particularly warm response from Groeschel's audience. 'We've found a great and inexpensive way to draw people to Church Online', he announces: 'we're buying Google AdWords'.

The problem is, we've found that not many people were googling Church Online – but we did find that a lot of people were googling things like 'naked ladies' [laughter from the congregation]. So if you're googling for naked ladies while church is online, an ad will pop up saying 'Looking for naked ladies? Why don't you try Church Online?' [laughter, applause]. And you say, does anybody actually click through? You would not believe what happens when people are about to go to something, and, oh man, church, maybe this is God, maybe this is... [laughter].

To demonstrate this success, the pastor reads out an email the church has received from a man who confesses he was 'lost'. 'I was looking at some girls dancing on YouTube and about to go to a porn site when your ad popped up. I never made it to that other site because I was drawn to LifeChurch instead. I know God was drawing me. Thank you.' [applause, cheering]. 'To reach people no one is reaching', Pastor Craig repeats, 'you've got to do things no one is doing.'

This received a warm response from chat contributors as well:

- searching naked ladies.... try church online! LOL
- woohooooooooo!
- Love that
- that's hilarious

Another theme of chatroom conversation throughout the Experience may not be unrelated to this strategy. 'anyone interested in sexy chat?', asks one contributor; 'i want to see sex', types another. Church staff try to reply encouragingly, responding to the first 'no [username], i'm not, but thanks for asking!', and to the second, 'you will not see that, but I encourage you to stay', and 'that isn't here, but you are welcome to stay in this conversation about God's love and what community with followers of Jesus looks like'. At the same time, however, other viewers sought to silence and evict these contributors, apparently failing to appreciate or share the goals of the church staff: 'you need to leave', 'You are out of line', 'why would you say that?'. In one case, a visitor, S, explained over the course of the Experience that he was a 'true hindu' from India who considered himself a Christian, but then began to ask another visitor for her phone number. 'ADMIN BAN S', a visitor, R, typed. 'R church online is for people like s', replied one of the church leaders. LifeChurch.tv may have decided to invite those searching for online pornography to join Church Online, but not all viewers accept the contributions of those who take up the offer.

A final story is told to illustrate yet another potential impact of Church Online. ‘We got an email from a 13-year old boy from Malaysia, a Muslim who had been coming to Church Online secretly, and he committed his life to Christ and he was asking us for some resources that could help him, but we had to mail somewhere secretly or he could be kicked out of his family or something worse.’ This tale leads to an announcement. ‘He asked, can I get this for free? And this answer is yes, that’s how we do it, we give all this away for free [...] It’s free to him, but it’s not free to us’. ‘Because so many people are excited about this’, the church has established a new online giving option. ‘No hard pitch’, Pastor Craig assures his audience, but ‘some of you are going to want to give above your normal giving to a place called Digital Missions’.

Groeschel is quite clear that this kind of optional giving is expected in addition to the normal tithe, not as a way to redistribute giving to a new cause. Comments like this are relatively rare in LifeChurch, generally restricted to one fundraising series per year, but the expectation of tithing is a key point to bear in mind when considering the success of Church Online: financial resources are needed to employ teams of pastors, digital strategists and technical support workers and the hardware, software and bandwidth they rely on.

That said, Groeschel takes care to show how cost-effective online ministry can be:

When we reach someone, we call them ‘digital touches’, just our language. If someone downloads a message, that’s one digital touch. If someone comes to Church Online, that’s one digital touch. [...] A year ago last month we had 362,000 digital touches at only 32 cents each – that includes our whole staff that’s devoted to this, all the start-up costs and such. Then one year later, just a month ago, that number increased to over 880 000, 888 000 digital touches, and the cost went down to 8 cents. And here’s what’s going to happen: we’re going to continue to reach more people and the costs are going to continue to go down. And some of you may catch the vision for this and you’re going to want to dive in and use your gifts, use your skills, and give to this. And I’ll tell you right now, we’re not going to be a church like churches used to be, we’re going to change, we’re going to push the limits, and I promise you we’re

going to do anything short of sin to reach people who do not know Christ. The number of people in need is at an all-time high, and this is not just an opportunity, it's a responsibility.

Prayer and sex talk are not the only activities discouraged in public chat. Some contributors seek debate and discussion during the message, and these are directed to other channels by volunteers and other visitors. One self-described atheist posted a series of unconnected questions and statements. Others responded with enquiries – ‘have you been reborn?’ – web links, private email addresses for further conversation, and eventually discouragement. This poster – who seemed to write flawless English – claimed he or she had only studied religion in Italian and Spanish and couldn't understand terms like ‘being born again’, an interesting example of the opportunities and challenges posed by the global ambitions of LifeChurch. When the atheist poster asked ‘So, what is your opinion about the Dead Sea manuscripts?’, Brandon Donaldson finally intervened. A brief conversation ensued, scattered over unrelated intervening posts:

D: H this is not the place write me at brandon@lfechurch.tv. I love the conversation

H: Brandon, why isn't this the place?

H: I mean, that's the purpose of having a chat, right?

I : H - e-mail brandon@lfechurch.tv and he would love to talk to you about your questions.

D: This chat is built around this video message to the left. It is to help us engage further with the content there

J : H, it's really to keep on track with the teaching going on

J : But H, if you want to keep in touch, I invite you to follow me on Twitter

J : I'm @[...] I'd like to keep in touch

D here is Brandon Donaldson, I a volunteer, H the atheist poster, and J a visitor.

iv) PRAYER

The main message has lasted half an hour and ends with a shift into a time of prayer. Pastor Craig invites his audience to commit to evangelism, and without missing a beat closes his eyes, raises his arms and starts to pray: ‘Give us a heart and a passion for those who don’t know your son Jesus’. As viewers pray around the different campuses, they are instructed to think of someone far from God and work out how to reach them. ‘Can you get them a free Bible? Can you refer them to a message? Can you say, ‘Hey, I know you’ll never go to church, but would you mind meeting me at Church Online? Totally safe, no way you can be endangered. Would you do this with me?’’ This is the first of two sets of prayers, a pattern repeated in every Experience. The first relates to that message, and the second is a kind of altar call.

Each prayer involves audience participation through the raising of hands, and this is reproduced online. A specific phrase is highlighted from Groeschel’s prayer and posted below the main video window with a small image. When the viewer rolls their cursor across the image, it moves, shifting from a simple head and shoulders to a dramatically raised arm. The number of clicks on this image is shown alongside; in this screenshot fragment, as you can see, 17 people have announced that they ‘give their lives to Jesus’.



Initially, the first prayers were delivered by Groeschel and the second by Brandon Donaldson. This mirrored the practice of each local campus, where the campus pastor comes

on-stage to deliver the call to decision in person. The immediacy of this personal address is central to the delivery of the prayer. At physical campuses, volunteers line the aisles, look out for raised hands, and bring these to the attention of the campus pastor who then acknowledges them – one at the front, two on the left at the back, and so on. By assigning the decision prayer to Brandon Donaldson, the same practice could be pursued online, with each electronic ‘hand raised’ acknowledged, and this call to Christ could come from the same person who spent time talking with the Internet Campus visitors in their chatroom.

By the time of the Experience described here, in mid-2009, this division of labour had ceased. Church Online no longer followed every detail of the Campus system so closely, and had changed in other ways too: the vastly increased numbers of Experiences were now manned around the clock by teams of volunteers, with Donaldson appearing only at a few, and it made less sense to suppose that each viewer would have a more personal relationship with Donaldson than Groeschel. One recorded prayer was, perhaps, as good as another. Groeschel’s prayers are broadcast, and Donaldson now contributes a brief video afterwards to congratulate new believers and encourage them to apply for a free ‘What’s Next Kit’. LifeChurch encourages anyone who makes a ‘commitment to Christ’ to fill out a ‘Communication Card’ reporting their decision to the church, including a space for ‘your story’ and a box to check to give permission for that story to be shared anonymously. Anyone who completes a card with their name and address receives a free pack including a study Bible, carry case, and CDs of messages.

The chat window responded to the decision prayer with great enthusiasm, posting streams of messages praising God, congratulating new believers and declaring faith:

- Call on his name today!
- SURRENDER to Him in love
- i surrender completely to you
- Heavenly Father, I am a sinner, I need a savior, Save me...my life now belongs to you.
- Amen..Welcome to God's family!!!!!!!!!!

- Congratulations to those of you who are committing to Christ right now. This is the most important decision of your life! The Bible says angels in heaven celebrate when just 1 person commits to Christ. Awesome!!
- If you just surrendered your life to the One Jesus, request your What's Next Kit. Link under video, <http://internet.lifechurch.tv/whats-next/> or in the top right corner where it says What's Next.
- Thank you Jesus for drawing these people to You

Notably, none of those 17 who 'raised a hand' discussed their decision in the chat window. Only two postings could be interpreted as reporting some kind of conversion, the third and fourth quoted above, and it is far from clear what kind of spiritual decision these statements actually represent.

v) ENDING AND DEPARTURE

The whole Experience finally ended – exactly one hour after it started – with a call and response. This one-hour duration is carefully planned and executed, requiring perfect timing by every contributor in each of the many campuses to ensure that each component starts and ends at the right times and the service flows flawlessly between on-stage, recorded and live broadcast elements. The decision to fix an Experience at exactly one hour is also intentional: as my guide in Oklahoma explained to me, Americans are accustomed to television shows lasting one hour and might balk at anything longer.

'Whoever finds God', Brandon Donaldson declares, 'finds life!', and this classic LifeChurch slogan is repeated by many in the chatroom. The video screen cuts to show the LifeChurch logo, and a clip of the song 'God of the City' by Chris Tomlin is played. The same track plays every week: 'greater things are yet to come', runs the lyric, 'and greater things are still to be done, in this city'.

The community continues to speak to one another for half an hour, with discussion topics including favourite Christian songs, Christian books, and sharing theological advice – ‘I’m going to be an author and I want to make a fantasy novel about God. Is there anything that would be blasphemous about putting God in a fictional book?’. Some type praise for LifeChurch – ‘Thank God for Lifechurch.tv and the community of believers!’, ‘the great thing about church online is that you see people from ALL walks of life’ – while others bid farewell and give insights into their offline lives: ‘well Im on my way now to server at my Pysical Church...I love you all and God bless you all!’ At the end of the half-hour, the chatroom closes, without warning; any conversations are cut off, the private prayer lines are no longer available, and communication ceases until the next Experience.

Certain themes are missing from chatroom discussion, even after the Experience ends. There is almost no recognition by visitors of one another. Indeed, in this transcript no visitor posts a comment suggesting that they remember any other visitor from a previous week – despite the very frequent expressions of ‘love’ for the ‘community’ and great affection for LifeChurch. To some extent this is a function of the Experience time. The Experience I describe here is one of the busiest of the week, and may therefore be expected to show a particularly high fluctuation in members and volume of chat postings, and smaller Experiences do offer greater opportunities to build recognition. Still, the general point remains valid: LifeChurch Experiences are not, in my observations, successful places for generating long-term acquaintances or friendships, and contrast very strikingly in this respect with the other churches studied. There is also very little conversation relating to offline lives or non-Christian themes and almost no use of humour or play. Chat is by no means limited to engaging with the Experience, as quotes above have shown, but much does reflect and respond to that streamed content and participants focus almost exclusively on Christian, devotional communication. They pray, praise God, congratulate LifeChurch, share their enthusiasm for the content, and engage in some level of conversation with some of the small minority who seek to ask questions about faith.

SECOND LIFE

The Church Online website is just one place where Experiences can be viewed. LifeChurch has also created its own space in Second Life, 'Experience Island'.

In our conversation in Oklahoma, Donaldson spoke warmly of the user-generated content and interaction possibilities of Second Life, welcoming the 'opportunity to go into a community' and join people where they meet. 'That's a place where we can actually go to where they are and say well, you've created this world, here's a church, and be able to reach those people that are out there.' LifeChurch had, at relatively little expense, created a space where volunteers – 'I rarely go in there any more', Donaldson admitted – could run Experiences, invite friends, start their own in-world study groups, and encourage one another to evangelise. Donaldson observed that 'many people use Second Life for things that are not what I would say are healthy, like pornography' – 'we want to be that other option, that light, in what we might consider the darkness.'

The design of the LifeChurch presence in Second Life '*is* the Stillwater Oklahoma Campus'. The logic here was two-fold: 'we wanted to be a campus', a place people would visit to attend Experiences, but also 'it's a great way for people to take a look at a campus' and 'really experience' what visiting LifeChurch is like. Design work was outsourced, but volunteers are encouraged to add more creative touches as needed. I visited Stillwater in 2008, and include photographs here to demonstrate the similarity; note the golfcart on the right hand side of the Stillwater photo, one of several used to ferry the congregation from their cars to the church door.



The attention to detail is certainly striking, and goes far beyond what might be required or useful in-world. The visitor walks through a lobby area to an auditorium lined with rows of seats that - given the effective limits to large gatherings in Second Life imposed by lag, and the normal order of magnitude of Second Life audiences – are invariably sparsely used. The Experience is displayed on three large screens, again copying the layout of Stillwater rather than any Second Life necessity and risking lag. Note the fairy-clown-fisherman avatar at the bottom right – LifeChurch does not object to unusual avatar design, although most visitors are rather more conventionally attired.



Each side of the hall is lined with the small tables used in local campuses to offer bread and juice for self-administered communion, but these cannot be consumed or animated.



Turning left from the lobby, the visitor passes an office – containing an automated avatar responsible for logging traffic – and enters an area reserved in Stillwater for children and young people. Every LifeChurch campus offers a set of brightly-decorated classrooms, and even though Second Life does not allow anyone under 18 to register this whole area is faithfully reproduced right down to the signs in the hallways and the special LifeChurch wallpaper.



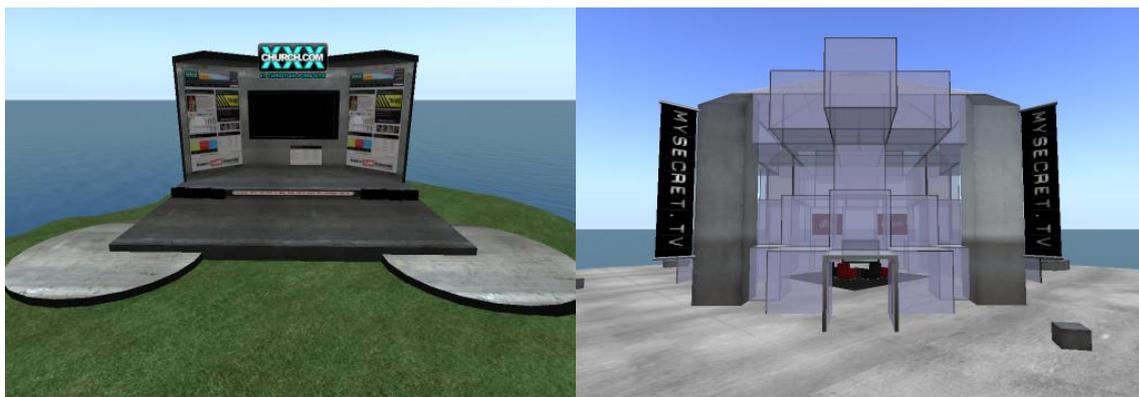
LifeChurch has not developed any material designed to appeal specifically to Second Life users. According to Donaldson, ‘that’s not something we feel called to do’ – particularly given the small numbers of people attracted each week, relative to the Internet Campus. According to Donaldson the Second Life space attracted an average of 50 visitors per weekend, against 1500 to the Internet Campus. Dylan, the volunteer leader of Experience Island, claimed an all-time high of 60 visitors at once. LifeChurch couldn’t be all things to all people, Donaldson explained, but ‘we try to create an environment where God can do what only He can’. LifeChurch had seen that God uses the one-hour Experience format, ‘so we try to push that to as many places as we can.’ Other resources could be provided elsewhere online, he reminded me – ‘they have the ability to get out of Second Life into the Internet’ and join a LifeGroup if they wish to do so.

Part of Dylan’s task is the development of tools and advertising to distribute around Second Life, and here we do see some original and culture-specific material. He seemed particularly proud of a large virtual sword and sheath he had created in conjunction with a series entitled ‘Warrior’, and presented me with a copy of my own, complete with the display of controls needed to animate it. ‘At the Movies’ was advertised with free movie-star avatars, and freebie clothing decorated with LifeChurch logos was on offer in the lobby. Advertising was pursued through billboards, in-world newspapers and events listings, and Dylan also took charge of ‘griever control’ to protect the campus against any hostile interference. The

billboard shown here displays a logo created to advertise the island, with the slogan ‘Prayer in your Underwear’ – note also the red sports car parked precariously on the church roof.



Space on the island is also given to two groups specifically targeting the perceived ‘unhealthy’ activities of the ‘darkness’ of Second Life: the anti-pornography group XXXchurch.com and mysecret.tv, an online confessions project run by LifeChurch.



Both of these virtual buildings are shells, linking to external websites without any expectation of in-world activity. Brandon Donaldson explained the decision to include these spaces as a ‘strategic’ response to the guilt felt by some of those in Second Life:

You'll see on the island XXXChurch. For those that are really looking for help, because they come to our island, you probably know it's called Experience Island, so for those that don't know real quick that it's a church, one of the reasons we have strategically put that there is that those are a group of people that we've partnered with and they deal specifically with one of those issues, pornography. For those that are looking for help and come to the church, they can find it right there on the island. And also the MySecret Pavilion [...] it used to be a series, it's now a website, but that's actually a place where they can begin to engage in talking that is specific to some of those things that might be secret, like pornography or any kind of hidden things. So those are put there for that reason.

The reference here to 'those that don't know real quick that it's a church' suggests some visitors might be confused by the invitingly-named 'Experience Island' and arrive expecting to find one of Second Life's many sex clubs. I never met anyone who admitted to visiting the island in search of XXXChurch or MySecret – hardly surprisingly – and have no evidence to indicate how widely the pavilions have been used.

I interviewed 7 visitors to Experience Island, including Dylan, and heard various accounts of its appeal and strengths. One English visitor, Paula, also appeared regularly at the Cathedral. She spoke dismissively of the actual building style – 'it's like a cinema', she told me, 'how boring!' – and described the island as 'a venue to meet people', but neither attitude was shared by other interviewees. Florence showed little concern for architecture – 'we could meet anywhere and accomplish the same thing' – but claimed the builders 'did a wonderful job with it [...] it does make the church look more 'legit''. Several preferred the island to the Church Online website, because it let them see others watching with them. 'It felt more like 'real church' to me', Florence explained, 'I think it feels more like a community [...] I wasn't at all interested in watching on the web site any more.'

Despite this reference to community, one striking feature of Experience Island was its emptiness. Visitors to the Anglican Cathedral engage one another in conversation after events and at unplanned times throughout the week, but visitors to LifeChurch.tv throughout the period of my observations left the island as soon as services ended. I did discover avatars there on several occasions outside Experience times, but these were often drawn to the space precisely because they knew it would be empty. One woman used a section of the island as a sandbox, a space to practice her building skills while designing an item to be displayed elsewhere, while on another occasion I discovered two women on the roof in private conversation. They politely talked to me for a few minutes, before explaining that they were trying to discuss the end of their romantic affair and sending me on my way. When I asked Dylan if visitors came to the island to socialise or stayed after services, he seemed unconcerned by this aspect of church life:

occasionally, but not much
for the most part people just come to watch the experience
its ok by me
[...]
this is a lot more like a real life life church
ppl meet ppl here and then go somewhere else to do things

Interviewees reported two factors that help explain this lack of conversation: a focus on the teaching provided by LifeChurch.tv, and a reliance on other groups and resources to provide different forms of church life and activity. Gloria, an American woman with Swedish ancestry, first encountered LifeChurch at a time of spiritual searching:

looking to grow
a hunger to learn more of God
and lifechurch gave that to me
the teaching

Teaching was ‘real life’, dealing with startling and unusual topics that other churches shied away from. This was not her only online church, however:

lifechurch teaches me to grow in my Christian faith
and noway church [a Swedish Lutheran church in Second Life]
gives me tradition

Many other churches in Second Life were peaceful places to pray on her own.

Helen spoke enthusiastically of other online resources, including podcasts and newsletters, and attended another Second Life church in preference to LifeChurch.tv – ‘I can watch those online anytime’, she explained, using the LifeChurch.tv message archives. Archived messages offered the opportunity to stop and rewind whenever she wished, and ‘I never really interact with anyone if I attend in SL anyway so they’re both about the same for me’. For these interviewees, at least, friendship and companionship were not reasons to attend Experience Island. Reluctance to linger after services when teaching had ended reflected their satisfying attachments elsewhere in and out of the virtual world.

LIFEGROUPS AND WATCH PARTIES

The lack of relationship-building activity observed at the Church Online website and in Second Life is offset to some degree by the presence of small groups offering opportunities for contact outside the Experiences. ‘LifeGroups’ are one of the five core activities of LifeChurch.tv, along with the Experience, LifeKids, Switch (the youth division) and LifeMissions, and the principle of living life in small groups was emphasised again and again in interviews with staff, volunteers and members. The structure and style of LifeGroups is enormously diverse, but those I have visited, and the members I interviewed, offer some insights into their activity and culture.

For Brandon Donaldson, LifeGroups are an essential response to inescapable facts about human existence. ‘We’re built for relationships’, he explained, ‘we weren’t built to lead

a Christian life alone'. These comments come from our telephone conversation, and were repeated when we met face-to-face: 'relationships are important, period.' Church Online employs a LifeGroups and Missions Pastor, a role filled in late 2008 by Robert Davis, and our interview elaborated greatly on these observations. According to Davis, the Bible shows that 'Jesus spent the majority of his time with twelve people. He spoke to the crowds, but he lived with twelve.' The New Testament church operated a 'growth model' based on small home-based groups, and 'I think scripturally we're trying to adhere to that'. 25 000 people came to LifeChurch Experiences every weekend at the time of our conversation, and those crowds made it easy for individuals to 'come and go' without intimate fellowship. This is unbiblical and ineffective, Davis argued: 'you cannot do Christianity as an individual. So you're setting people up for success by getting them in a small group.' Small groups were crucial: 'for creating spiritual transformation I think small groups are more effective than Experiences. So my goal would be to see more people engaging in our small groups than in our Experiences [...] I think small groups are the way to do church.' For Davis, 'online tools' have brought back 'the lost art of discipleship, of meeting one on one.'

LifeGroups we say are the smaller side of life – it's where you're going to develop friendships, it's where you're going to develop community, it's where you're going to receive encouragement, it's where you get some accountability, and have, in biblical community you're going to have the Word of God, it's going to saturate your life, everything's going to be exposed with it in that kind of a group.

I think what we've learned is that, I think that, if you look at our mission statement, lead people to become fully devoted followers of Christ, and that's just, that's going to take place in a smaller setting. I think it's just a real natural instinct that people have, to know and to be known, and you can't be known in a crowd. It takes a smaller group for that to happen. I don't think it's just addressing the Bible per se, I think it's addressing sociological ideas as well.

Certain elements would be needed for such a group to succeed – respect, truthfulness, reciprocity, care, responsibility – but with real commitment any digital tool could be integrated into a small group.

The tool doesn't matter, but I would hesitate to see people move further away from any type of commitment, you know, come post on this forum whenever you feel like it. I'd like to see us go the other way and let's start by perhaps meeting in a large group setting, then let's come to a small group, then let's email, let's text, let's speak on the phone, you know, I think you're trying to get life upon life, and I would look for tools that create greater engagement instead of sort of a loose operating system.

This emphasis on Group over Experience was shared by other interviewees. Jodie, for example, argued that ‘just attending the Internet Campus on the weekends would not be good’ if the visitor didn’t join a LifeGroup. ‘I really believe that the LifeGroup is everything... It’s where you build community... go deeper in’ and are held accountable. ‘Relationships are key to everything’. For Ken, a LifeGroup leader, Experiences brought people in to hear the gospel and the chatroom could ‘begin a relationship’, but ‘we don’t believe anything really significant happens’ unless people get into groups. ‘To become fully devoted we have to get *connected*, that’s the way God designed it’. ‘This is where the real church takes place’, ‘by connecting with each other we connect with God.’

Almost all of my interviewees were part of LifeGroups, simply because small, stable groups and regular members proved to be my most successful source of contacts. A minority did not, however, and offered interesting explanations for their resistance to the small group philosophy.

For some, the role of a LifeGroup was already filled in their everyday lives. Lester, for example, cited a particular friendship group lasting 15 years or more: ‘we have a kind of LifeGroup with each other’. Others argued that online LifeGroups could never achieve real fellowship. Mary and Bridget are flatmates in Dublin, and spoke to me together by telephone

in mid-2009. For Bridget, online friendship is not an option; some may claim such relationships, she conceded, but in 20 years of internet use she had found the dimensions of sharing life and face-to-face communication irreplaceable. According to Bridget 'if we're going to do LifeGroups we're going to have to do physical LifeGroups', and none existed in Dublin. A similar view was expressed by Christina in Austria in the emails we exchanged, with a different rationale: 'I haven't joined a LifeGroup. The only possible LifeGroup would be an online group, which I don't think is a very effective way of doing smallgroup. There may be a core of committed members, but at the same time there are too many strangers (one-time attendees) just dropping by and listening in. That kind of prevents more deep-going conversations. Don't know, I think smallgroup is best done offline and really meeting up face to face, with people staying from beginning to end.'

One interesting feature of several LifeChurch conversations was a disconnection between 'community', which was highly valued, and 'friendship', which was not. Christina came to LifeChurch after finding that many church websites had 'no live online communities', and stated that 'I enjoy the community of people [at LifeChurch] who are my age - I'm 30 - and who also use modern technology'. The key to the reality of the LifeChurch community is that 'people are ACTUALLY THERE. It's this virtual place where they meet, but the way they participate online is real: they sing, listen, take notes, talk to each other, etc. With their minds, people are at the same place at the same time.' There is no mention here of the quality of relationships between these people, only of the fact that they are communicating together and sharing an experience. When I asked if she had made friends at LifeChurch, she replied 'No, I haven't started to make friends there, and it isn't important to me. It's a process that takes time, and one that is usually based on sharing a certain life situation, helping each other, similar interests, etc. ... doing life together, I guess.' The difference here between LifeChurch and the other four churches studied is striking. Noah's explanation reflects widespread sentiments:

Interviewer: do you feel you've made friends at lifechurch? or is that not important to you?

Noah: it is not as important as you would think
LifeChurch has one purpose

to go out and bring people into a totally devoted follower of Christ so that they
may go out and reach others
and that is my will as well

Those who did join LifeGroups could choose from many themes, audiences and media. Church Online offers text and video chatrooms for LifeGroups and some use these weekly. Text and video material is provided each week, but groups can choose to use these as they wish or not at all. Leaders have great freedom over the style and theme of the groups, and volunteers are encouraged to step forward to lead groups of their own. At the time of my visit to Oklahoma, Robert Davis claimed that some 40 groups were meeting online and another 25 face-to-face, all connected with the Internet Campus.

Rebecca moved from Oklahoma to London with her family to pursue mission work using LifeChurch resources. She works as Experience Captain for several Experiences aimed at the GMT time zone, and leads a LifeGroup, 'Global Posse'. Meetings are held after the 10am GMT Sunday Experience, usually in a text chatroom but sometimes using video. Each meeting starts with sociable conversation, then discusses questions composed by LifeChurch to explore the week's message and closes with prayers. Posse membership is very fluid, with a regular core of three or four and another three or four newcomers each week.

A more stable and intensely relational group was described by another interviewee, Pamela. Her group, 'Friends of the Family', met in a web-cam and text chatroom and communicated through the week via an email list, exchanging several prayer requests each day. Pamela originally wanted to get more 'plugged in' to LifeChurch and to meet a range of new people, and the couple leading her LifeGroup were so supportive of her personal problems and disability that they 'started drawing me in even more'. 'They're family', she explained. The members are all open with one another, to the point of harshness when required, and Pamela considered the leaders especially gifted at such judgement: 'it's like God's given them the exact right words' each time. These close relationships helped keep her focused and accountable, and included conversations on MSN and email and one opportunity to travel to meet some of the group face-to-face. Pamela had no other friends in LifeChurch at all. The benefits Pamela claimed from her group were powerful and wide-ranging, starting

with conversation – questions ‘really make you think and everyone interacts with each other’, sharing different points of view – but also impacting her confidence and personality. She had become more positive, ‘more outgoing’, willing to talk online but also in face-to-face situations. ‘I’m not trying to stay in my shy little corner’; the ‘healing’ God had done in the group was ‘part of God’s will in showing me that it’s OK to open up.’

Other groups focus on a specific theme. Ken runs two groups at once and composes his own curriculum for each. One is intended for new believers and lasts six months, after which members are encouraged to move on to other groups; the series attracts ‘a large crowd’, with around ten remaining by the end. The other is ‘kind of an exclusive group’, with six members, intended for people ‘who *really* want to study Scripture’ and not for the ‘weak at heart’. Bridget had also created a closed group, connecting with one other person to study a well-known Christian book about leadership.

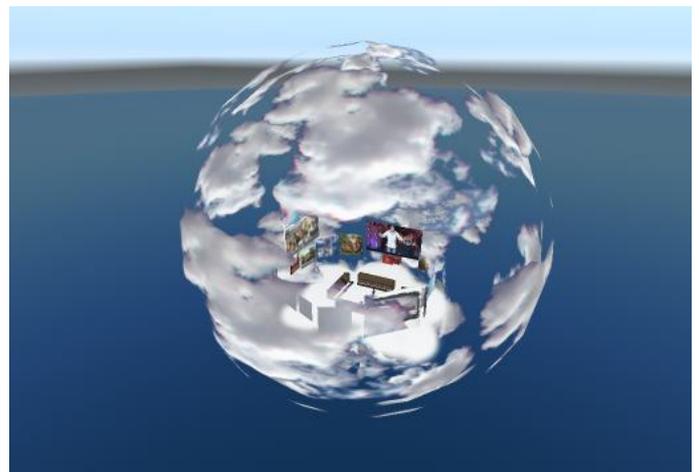
Groups also meet in Second Life, and I met the two leaders active there in late 2008. Florence and her real-life husband, also her Second Life partner, ran a group in their house. An array of seating around a video screen allowed participants to watch LifeChurch videos, comment on the questions, and end with prayers.



Noah's LifeGroup met at a rather more unusual location, a 'church in the clouds' high above the ground. Four wooden pews were arranged in a square hanging in mid-air inside a ball of cloud, circled by a ring of large images and video screens. The screens were used by Noah himself to watch the weekly message, streaming from Church Online. Noah claimed to have gathered up to 20 people at a time to his group, but preferred '5 or 6 true devotees'. He used his group for 'putting people on the right path and straight', specifically by rejecting in-world sex and relationships, but his teachings were not always popular:

i had one come one time
told me i spent too much time talking about how people need to be careful in sl
I told her I really don;t do it enough
that if you look around sl, you can see i am losing
and she even agreed.

He created his own study material, using messages for inspiration and speaking 'frequently' to staff, but visited Experience Island only rarely and expressed disappointment with the lack of community interaction he saw there.



Florence first bought land in Second Life and built her house when a regular LifeChurch attender suggested he would like to start his own LifeGroup and needed a venue. Unfortunately, 'he came 2-3 times and taught the group... and just disappeared. And that is how I learned to lead a LifeGroup ;-)' . The would-be leader had left the world altogether, and was never heard from again. Leading the group proved 'fun, rewarding, hard, disappointing... probably not so different from any RL bible study'. It was rewarding to see people grow, and to feel herself growing in confidence, but hard 'seeing so many people come and go... I just haven't seen the stability in our group that I would like, and which I think would be easier to maintain in an RL group.' Noah shared the same complaint, and connected it to his own insistence on truth and virtue:

I let them know they need to grow
a lot of times, they dont want to hear me
so i get some that come a time or two
tell me they really like the message
but then they never come back

Sin was also a major theme in both interviews. As Florence explained, 'I've [...] befriended people who have come to our church and group... spent a lot of time building a relationship with them, and then have seen them get involved with some very questionable things on SL... and that has been hard for me as well.' These 'questionable things' included 'things like Gor [a domination-themed subculture based on a series of science fiction novels], the really nasty combat sims, strip clubs and the whole sex thing on SL'. 'SL makes it so easy for people to get involved with the wrong things'. Online sin was a constant theme throughout my conversations with Noah:

most of SL is crap
most of sl is a lot of sinning
a lot of lust
even the so-called Christians
I see them all the time

they get hurt
I tell them they need a closer relationship with God
they feel better
then they jump right back into sin :(
it hurts a lot
I know I can feel some of God's pain
but this is how people are
and all we can do is try to help
and if e can't, just move on

Conversations at the Anglican Cathedral also touched on this concern, but it was a much less prominent theme.

One more aspect of LifeGroups must be mentioned here: the 'Watch Party' and local gatherings. As Robert Davis explained in Oklahoma, 'some say, I don't want a LifeGroup online, I want to engage with my co-workers or people in my neighbourhood or an already existing circle of friends. So we lead through that as well.' Using Church Online as a focal point and source of resources, these individuals persuade friends and neighbours to gather with them to watch broadcasts from LifeChurch.tv.

I have been able to speak to leaders of two Watch Parties after persuading one of the LifeChurch volunteers to forward my contact details to some of her friends and acquaintances. We have encountered one team already: Mary and Bridget, the flatmates from Dublin quoted above. These friends, inspired by conversations at Church Online, decided to invite acquaintances to their flat to watch episodes of the flagship annual series 'At the Movies' and had hosted two such gatherings by the time of our interview. 'We just simply invited some friends', Mary explained, speaking to people at work, church and at a social club they have joined, and organised their computer network to show the Experience on their large flat-screen television. They emphasised the movie theme with popcorn, pizza and sweets, and discussed the message afterwards. 3 people came to their first meeting, and 2 to the second, and this was regarded as a good turnout from the few people they had invited. Some who attended were Christians, but others were not, or attended church without showing

what Mary and Bridget considered real faith. According to Bridget, ‘they all so far have really enjoyed it’; LifeChurch offered a perfect chance to show that churches can be modern, young and relevant.

The second Watch Party leader spoke to me by email from Spain. Martin, a Church Online volunteer, had been planting churches in Spain for over a year now, trying to present ‘a modern and relevant Christianity in the 21st century.’ Martin has worked in the past with Spanish-speaking communities, but is currently trying to plant English-language churches for those not currently attending any other church. Using the Experiences and the ‘Watch Party’ model, Martin decided to host an event called ‘Breakfast Church’ once per month:

We invite existing contacts to our home to share a full cooked breakfast and then watch a broadcast from lifechurch, usually the live Sunday morning broadcast, but we have also used downloaded sessions from Open Source at Lifechurch.tv.

Participants are encouraged to sing with the worship bands, to help offer ‘an introduction to church and ‘church type’ behaviour’, and ‘the style of worship and the talks fits well with our mission objective to reach out to young people and young families.’ An average of ten people attend, including one or two with no previous church experience; the remainder come from the small congregation of Martin’s church plant.

LIFEMISSIONS

So far, this chapter has discussed LifeChurch.tv, the Experience, the Second Life Campus, and the LifeGroup. One final component of LifeChurch’s online work must be mentioned: the LifeMission. None of the interviewees I spoke to had taken part in a LifeChurch mission, so the accounts here are drawn from the LifeChurch blog and interviews with staff.

Robert Davis, LifeGroups and Missions Pastor at the time of our interview, listed a number of ventures that LifeChurch had launched. Many relied on individual initiative and creativity, designing tools and resources and encouraging visitors to use these in their own networks and online spaces:

One of the things that we identified early on was to leverage people's place in their social networks, MySpace, Facebook [...] something that we say is, 'Make Your Space His Space.' So we've created tags, we've created banners, we've created badges, we've done video that people can embed, to reach out and share the name of Jesus and LifeChurch, use it as marketing, sort of viral marketing for LifeChurch.tv. So that's one, we'll get together and do YourSpace Invasion types of events.

Some Missions have been financial, like 'Shoes for Orphaned Souls', when the Internet Campus partnered with a charity to give visitors an opportunity to buy shoes for children. Others have involved closer work with local campuses, joining in with mission trips across the USA:

I've probably led four or five mission trips, actual physical trips, and we've had people who attend the Internet campus participate in all of those. We've had people go to New York, New Orleans, Kansas, that are from other states that are Internet Campus attendees that actually physically go and serve on mission trips, and again the goal would be engagement and changed lives.

Davis expressed his vision for LifeChurch Missions through the slogan 'think globally, act locally'. 'I'm very big on responding to what God is putting right in front of you. I don't know, I think it's hard to call yourself a Christian if you're not working among the poor.' Some initiatives have tried to inspire work in the individual's local area, using online tools and resources to publicise events, encourage participation and share success stories:

We've done an event called Revolutionary Love, and created its own website and a blog [...] it was kind of a random acts of kindness, where you would do something for someone and you would either have a talk or you would just leave a card saying why you scraped the ice off their windshield or why you bought their Starbucks or why you raked their yard or bought their meal at a restaurant, and it was just to show the love of Christ in very tangible ways, and where the web came in, obviously people signed up and we notified people but then we asked people to come back and post their stories, and we felt that that inspired other people to go out and do the same. And that was kind of, the idea with the card is if, once you're given one it was to prompt you to pass it on.

Other missions have been aimed at specific groups of people. My arrival in Oklahoma coincided with the launch of a 'Military Mission', and Internet Campus visitors were encouraged to participate by sending mail 'to tell a veteran or a soldier thank you for serving', posting prayers online or sending out care packages. Some, Davis hoped, would be willing 'to actually start a support group, one of our small groups, a life group, targeted specifically at our soldiers and their spouses.' Another mission initiative was organised by a truck driver, who printed out cards and copied messages and left them at truck stops to publicise LifeChurch and the Internet Campus.

CONCLUSION

If we return again to the seven themes and challenges identified in my study of Church of Fools, we can see that each emerges in significantly different ways in Church Online.

- 1) Church Online has also attracted considerable interest from visitors and journalists, but the scale of the congregation that has gathered there for worship

far outstrips service attendance elsewhere online. This is impressive, but should be kept in perspective: attendance at Church Online is comparable to a local LifeChurch campus. The move from Internet Campus to Church Online was intended partly to accelerate growth past that particular ceiling.

- 2) The ‘community’ of Church Online is important to visitors, but in a rather different form from that so highly valued elsewhere. Worshipping alongside other people seems to be key, rather than diversity of ideas or close friendships. Church Online is not designed for open discussion, and while some found friends in LifeGroups many insisted they had other priorities.
- 3) Some praised the worship music, others were indifferent, but the main spiritual benefits cited in interviews came from the preaching of Craig Groeschel. Preaching delivered a focused, clear, authoritative, challenging message that set the vision and tone for the whole church. Church Online’s emphasis on teaching and focus on making new disciples were foreign to the other churches studied, where more intimate, reflective and diverse kinds of spiritual experience were encouraged.
- 4) No visitor survey was conducted, but the vast majority of those I encountered were or had been regular churchgoers. Most Experiences include chatroom contributions challenging LifeChurch views, but these receive little if any support. Other contributors seek to silence, convince or convert such posters, strongly suggesting that the great majority of participants are already committed to the LifeChurch style of Christianity.
- 5) Familiarity was again key to site and worship design, but because the founders of the Internet Campus came from a different theological and ecclesiastical tradition the styles and practices adopted differed greatly from those I observed elsewhere. This emphasis on the familiar began to change with the launch of Church Online.
- 6) Control was a major concern, with debate and dissent quickly silenced. Control was managed partly through delegation to trusted volunteers, who guided chatroom discussion, operated private prayer channels and led small groups.
- 7) No other group studied showed such a strong connection to a particular local church, or such lavish resources. The other four churches were maintained

through generous commitment from volunteer designers; at Church Online, dedicated teams of full-time staff could commit time and finance to original, complex, sophisticated work.

CHAPTER SIX: THE DIGITAL AND THE EVERYDAY

In my discussion of Church of Fools, I identified seven key themes: mass appeal, community, spiritual experience, the persistence of local churchgoing, familiar elements of architecture and liturgy, internal control and external oversight. Differences between cultures and practices can be explored in depth through attention to the different responses of each church to these issues. I found this attention to unique dynamics more helpful than the generalising typologies offered by other researchers like Heidi Campbell³¹⁹ and Christopher Helland.³²⁰

In this final chapter, I take a different approach. Those seven issues were helpful for structuring my observations, but were not systematically generated; they include design themes, common challenges, and general community observations. I focus here on one analytical framework which seems to incorporate and illuminate all those insights and observations.

My five case studies can be understood to revolve around the many dimensions of a common theme: the different relationships between digital media and everyday life. Online churches are not self-contained worlds, separate from the rest of online and offline activity, and they do not merely replicate what occurs elsewhere. They show elements of continuity, imitation and originality, mingled and combined in complex ways.

I begin my investigation of this theme by indicating some of the shortcomings of one recent online exchange between a prominent critic and defender of online churches – a debate which ably demonstrates the hazards of ignoring the connections between digital and everyday. I then introduce some helpful concepts from new media scholarship. After these preliminary stages, I trace the relationship between online churches and everyday life through four major dimensions: copying the everyday, becoming part of the everyday, remaining distinct from the everyday, and becoming distinctively ‘online’.

³¹⁹ See, for example, Heidi Campbell, "Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 01, no. 1 (2005).

³²⁰ Christopher Helland, "Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas," in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, ed. Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan (London: JAI Press, 2000).

THE ONLINE AND THE VIRTUAL

It is no surprise to discover that Internet activity does not take place in a special realm distinct from 'offline' life, a 'cyberspace' separate from non-digital 'meatspace'.³²¹ Such binary distinctions have long been problematised, particularly by scholarly attention over the past decade to the everyday and embodied nature of media use. Wellman and Haythornthwaite's *The Internet in Everyday Life* (2002)³²² accuses earlier commentators of 'the fundamental sin of particularism, thinking of the Internet as a lived experience distinct from the rest of life'³²³. Users were considered as if 'immersed in online worlds unto themselves, separate from everyday life', with no attention to the processes and dynamics active in wider society. Texts like this helped establish the incorporation of the digital into the everyday as basic to all good studies of new media.

Too much discussion of the online church has been plagued by this 'fundamental sin'. Many persist in judging online churchgoing as an alternative to local church attendance, to be held accountable to some common set of requirements and ideals. All of my case studies demonstrate that this is a misreading of the situation. I have recounted many examples of individuals who regularly attend both an online and a local church, often while exploring other online resources, and we can only understand what online churches mean for these participants if we pay close attention to their networked, multi-channel religious lives.

My research suggests a profitable line of future enquiry, complementary to the emphasis I have placed on online communities: online churches should be considered as part of a new form of Christian life, one mode of religious behaviour in an increasingly digital world where practitioners seek out the resources and networks they need at each moment by drawing on a wide range of online and offline contacts, groups, communication channels, resources and activities. This is consistent with current sociological theories regarding patterns of interaction in Western society, discussed in (ii) below.

³²¹ The term 'meatspace' was popularised by John Perry Barlow in the mid-90s. See, for example, Barlow's signature at the end of 'A Cyberspace Independence Declaration', 1996, http://w2.eff.org/Censorship/Internet_censorship_bills/barlow_0296.declaration. Accessed 10-01-10.

³²² Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite, eds., *The Internet in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

³²³ Caroline Haythornthwaite and Barry Wellman, "The Internet in Everyday Life: An Introduction," in *The Internet in Everyday Life*, ed. Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002). p5

i) 'There is NO Virtual Church': an online debate

From August to October 2009 Out of Ur, a blog run by the American evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, published four posts debating the viability of online church: 'There Is NO Virtual Church' (one³²⁴ and two³²⁵), 'In Defence of Virtual Church'³²⁶, and 'Virtual Church is STILL a Bad Idea'³²⁷. The first, second and fourth were authored by Bob Hyatt, a pastor and blogger from Oregon and a high-profile critic of online churches,³²⁸ and the third by Douglas Estes, author of *SimChurch*.³²⁹

Hyatt's first article³³⁰ compares 'virtual church' with an older innovation. Drive-in churches, he claims, were marked by 'limited interaction, a completely passive experience, and a consumer-oriented 'Come as you want/Have it your way' message'. Visitors remained in their cars, 'without the fuss and muss of face-to-face interaction'. According to Hyatt, 'virtual churches' also offer fuss-free churchgoing, and are just as dangerous – because visitors could mistake them for "real" churches.

Is this a problem? Something we should be concerned about or resist? Absolutely. Because it's malforming for those involved (whether they know it or not) and because it's sub-biblical.

The problem, in my mind, with virtual community and internet campuses isn't that it's not church... it's that it is just church enough to be dangerous. Because it has all the easiest and most instantly gratifying parts of community without the harder parts, it ends up misshaping us.

³²⁴ Bob Hyatt, 'There is NO Virtual Church (Part One)', 'Out of Ur'.

http://www.outofur.com/archives/2009/08/there_is_no_vir.html. Accessed 10-01-10.

³²⁵ Hyatt, 'There is NO Virtual Church (Part Two)', 'Out of Ur'.

http://www.outofur.com/archives/2009/08/there_is_no_vir_1.html. Accessed 10-01-10.

³²⁶ Douglas Estes, 'In Defence of Virtual Church', 'Out of Ur'.

http://www.outofur.com/archives/2009/10/in_defense_of_v.html. Accessed 10-01-10.

³²⁷ Hyatt, 'Why Virtual Church is STILL a Bad Idea', 'Out of Ur'.

http://www.outofur.com/archives/2009/10/why_virtual_chu.html. Accessed 10-01-10.

³²⁸ Bob Hyatt, "Technology and the Gospel," in *Voices of the Virtual World: Participative Technology and the Ecclesial Revolution*, ed. Len Hjalmanson and John LaGrou (Lulu.com: Wikiklesia Press, 2007).

³²⁹ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

³³⁰ Hyatt, 'There is NO Virtual Church (Part One)'

In an internet campus, for example, I never need to listen to so-and-so tell me about their hard week (again). I see no needs around me and so feel zero compulsion to move to meet them. And that's the problem. The lack of all of that forms me in a good way.

There are four key moves here, each setting up the next. First, Hyatt identifies personal development as a necessary church goal. Second, he insists that 'good' personal development can be achieved only through exposure to the tedious and challenging aspects of community. Third, he argues that such aspects are only encountered face-to-face. Fourth, he assumes that the absence of these interactions online means their complete absence from the life of the online churchgoer.

Hyatt's fourth claim deserves particular attention. We see here the 'fundamental sin' of treating the Internet and the everyday as two separate realms. For Hyatt, it seems, the lack of 'all that forms me in a good way' in one online context means that those formative influences are absent altogether; he does not consider that they might be operating in different domains. The suggestion that such influences are absent online is highly questionable – online churches do offer scope for recognising the needs of others, and participants do not encounter only easy and gratifying conversations – but it is the assumption that it is necessary to find those influences online that sets the framework for his whole attack.

Hyatt's second post³³¹ repeats much the same moves, adding a theological framework: Calvin's definition of church as a place where 'the Word is preached, the sacraments are received, and church discipline practiced.' Online churches are found lacking on each count, but again it is the awkward, difficult and therefore face-to-face parts of churchgoing that Hyatt emphasises.

Douglas Estes' defence,³³² posted in October 2009, makes no attempt to challenge Hyatt's particularist assumptions. Nor does he offer actual examples of the experiences of online churchgoers, to demonstrate Hyatt's poor grasp of online community life. He does come close to the main issue, pointing out that online community may have face-to-face dimensions:

³³¹ Hyatt, 'There is NO Virtual Church (Part Two)'

³³² Estes, 'In Defence of Virtual Church'

every virtual church I've encountered has worked very hard to put into place 'regular' aspects—from baptisms to small groups to mission trips—in order to help build real community across the board.

Even here, though, the crucial point remains elusive. Estes pays no attention to the ways in which an individual may integrate their online practices into a multi-faceted religious life replete with other opportunities for experience and interaction.

In response,³³³ Hyatt simply takes these 'regular' aspects of online church community as further evidence of their inadequacy:

Ironically, Estes (unwittingly) offers the best arguments against the model. [...] It seems like he is saying that flesh and blood proximity is necessary for 'real community'—a contention I agree with.

[...]

Sim Church is a nice idea, but I would much rather see the proponents of virtual church argue for the effective use of technology as part of an overall strategy for connecting with people, while clearly and plainly telling them, 'This is not church.'

To be a part of the Body requires you to be present, fully present, to others in a way you can't be online. Internet tools may enhance that presence when you are apart, but they can't replace it. And nothing we do as a Church should ever communicate that they can.

The description of digital media as one part of overall patterns of connection is actually quite helpful, but both Hyatt and Estes insist on judging online churches and communities separately from the rest of online and offline activity.

ii) Understanding the Digital: 'Virtual', 'Synthetic', 'Domain' and 'Network'

³³³ Hyatt, 'Why Virtual Church is STILL a Bad Idea'

A more adequate understanding should consider online churches both as communities and as one part of the digitally-infused Christian lives of its members. Each of the five churches studied has its own culture, shared history and network of strong inter-personal relationships, and generates a strong sense of belonging. Such dimensions could be overlooked if we focus too much attention on the individual level of analysis. Equally, however, it is through attention to the users of each space, their networks of relationships, narratives of personal and shared experiences, and their lives outside the space that we come to understand how these spaces have developed and why they matter to their users. The online church is only comprehensible as a part of or as connected to many other spheres of belonging and activity.

This account meshes well with current sociological theories, and some influential ideas and debates will be introduced here to help understand this complex interweaving of connections and practices. We shall first discuss the ‘virtual’, noting some of the many commentators who have sought to reinterpret or replace that term, and then two concepts I have found helpful: the ‘network society’ and ‘networked individualism’.

Describing online activity as ‘virtual’ can be misleading. As Estes points out, the word ‘virtual’ conveys implications of un-reality, suggesting that the ‘virtual’ is merely an inadequate copy of the ‘real’.³³⁴ The language of ‘virtuality’ persists in popular discourse, nonetheless, leaving commentators with two possible courses of action: redefining the term to rule out misinterpretation, or replacing it with something more suitable.

Estes prefers careful definition:

virtual doesn’t mean fake, it means synthetic... The ‘virtual’ part of the term—which identifies where [online churches] meet—has nothing to do with the question of their realness or validity.³³⁵

He elaborates in *SimChurch*, arguing that ‘Virtual worlds are real, but they are created by people instead of by God... a *virtual world* is a created space where people can interact as

³³⁴ Estes, ‘In Defence of Virtual Church’

³³⁵ Estes, ‘In Defence of Virtual Church’

if in the real world, but through some type of technological medium.’³³⁶ This is contrasted with, among other things, an ‘*augmented world*’, where the real world is enhanced by technology like holograms or cybernetics.

This approach has the great advantage of adopting already-popular terminology, but implies that that life outside computers is not human-made or mediated. Tom Boellstorff emphasises this point,³³⁷ arguing for a new appreciation of the virtuality of the ‘real’:

Virtual worlds show us how, under our very noses, our “real” lives have been “virtual” all along. It is in being virtual that we are human: since it is human “nature” to experience life through the prism of culture, human being has always been virtual being. Culture is our “killer app”: we are virtually human.³³⁸

If ‘virtual’ means ‘synthetic’, then the importance of human-created cultures to our framing of experience shows that our lives have always been ‘virtual’.

Boellstorff also insists that the distinction between ‘virtual’ and what he calls ‘actual’ is crucial to our understanding of virtual worlds. ““Virtual” connotes approaching the actual *without arriving there*”, he claims, and the gap between the two is critical to both. ‘The binarism of virtual and actual is an experientially salient aspect of online culture’,³³⁹ something that users really do perceive and care about, and as such is a valuable tool when used ethnographically rather than ontologically. While there is a ‘referential and substantive relationship’ between the virtual and the actual, such relationships ‘constitute forms of social action sustaining that boundary’, not erasing it.³⁴⁰ The claim that participants care about virtuality is supported by my research and will be pursued in greater detail later in this chapter.

³³⁶ Estes, *SimChurch*. p22

³³⁷ Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2008).

³³⁸ *Ibid.* p5

³³⁹ *Ibid.* p19

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p27

Further insights can be drawn from scholars who have rejected the word ‘virtual’ altogether. Edward Castronova³⁴¹ favours a new language of the ‘synthetic’, hoping to emphasise constructedness without suggesting unreality. ‘Synthetic worlds’ are ‘crafted places inside computers ... designed to accommodate large numbers of people,’³⁴² ‘radically manufacturable places’³⁴³ where every aspect of the environment can be designed and adjusted. ‘Synthetic’ and ‘real’ worlds are separated by a porous ‘membrane’, acting as a ‘magic circle’ to protect the distinct set of rules operating within. This membrane ‘cannot be sealed completely: people are crossing it all the time in both directions, carrying their behavioural assumptions and attitudes with them.’³⁴⁴

Thomas Malaby³⁴⁵ follows Castronova’s example, but prefers ‘domain’ to ‘world’:

even this kind of labelling [synthetic world] runs the risk of continuing the conceptual habit of exceptionalism ... Instead, I blur the distinction between these spaces and others where people act by more generally using the term domain. A domain is a semibounded arena for action where certain conventional expectations apply and certain resources may be available ... Domains are not set apart from everyday life—their separability from each other is practical, not fundamental. [...] Synthetic worlds are remarkable precisely because they both appear to generate phenomena that are sui generis, but at the same time they increasingly demonstrate how futile it is to see them as essentially set apart.³⁴⁶

Boellstorff’s comments on the virtual/actual distinction show that it is not quite ‘futile’ to set ‘synthetic’ worlds apart. The distinction is meaningful for participants, and replacing ‘virtual’ with ‘synthetic’ would obscure some of the salient features of their experience and perceptions. The willingness of an online churchgoer to dress up as a dragon, make fun of the pastor and share their innermost thoughts is at least partly because – even while they find real online relationships and real spiritual experiences – there is a sense in which their online world is separate from everyday reality.

³⁴¹ Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³⁴² Ibid. p4

³⁴³ Ibid. p8

³⁴⁴ Ibid. p147

³⁴⁵ Thomas Malaby, "Parlaying Value: Capital In and Beyond Virtual Worlds," *Games and Culture* 1(2006).

³⁴⁶ Ibid. p69

It seems unlikely that participants will ever warm to referring to their online churches as ‘synthetic church domains’, but these are still valuable concepts. Thinking of churches as ‘domains’ – semibounded arenas for action, which may or may not share actors, resources and activities with other arenas – can help defuse some of the misapprehensions encountered in (i) above.

The connectedness of domains leads us to two further concepts: ‘the network society’ and ‘networked individualism’. Manuel Castells and Barry Wellman have both written extensively on digital technology and social change, and offer good introductions to these ideas.

The network society, according to Castells, is ‘a social structure built on [...] information networks powered by microelectronics-based information technology’.³⁴⁷ This new form of society transforms economics, politics and sociality, and both authors have pursued these implications in detail. Wellman offers a useful summary, which he repeats in several of his articles:

In networked societies: boundaries are permeable, interactions are with diverse others, connections switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies can be flatter and more recursive.³⁴⁸

My case studies display all four of these features. Socially, ideologically and geographically diverse individuals come together in groups with fluid membership, where leadership includes team collaboration, volunteer initiative, and direct communication between leaders and grassroots.

Wellman and Castells both reject technological determinism. Internet technology is matching patterns of social change, with mutual effects. According to Castells, ‘the Internet is not just a tool, it is an essential medium for the network society to unfold its logic. This is a clear case of co-evolution between technology and society... The network is the message, and

³⁴⁷ Manuel Castells, ‘The Internet and the Network Society’, in Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite (eds.), *The Internet in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) p xxix

³⁴⁸ Barry Wellman, ‘Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalized Networking,’ *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25, no. 2 (2001). p227

the Internet is the messenger.³⁴⁹ Wellman argues that the relationship between digital media and social change is one of ‘social affordances’, new possibilities opened up that individuals may then adopt, appropriate or resist. Such affordances include greater bandwidth, wireless portability, ease of global communication and information access, and the personalization of technology and knowledge management.³⁵⁰

According to Castells, the emphasis on ‘virtual communities’ in scholarly literature and public discourse in the 1990s was a mistake. In fact, the key issue was ‘the displacement from community to network as the central form of organizing interaction’.³⁵¹ Communities are based on ‘the sharing of values and social organization’, but networks are built by ‘the choices and strategies of social actors, be it individuals, families, or social groups’. Creating shared and durable cultures may no longer be of primary importance. Internet communities ‘rarely build lasting, personal relationships... but if the specific connections are not durable, the flow lasts, and many participants in the network use it as one of their social manifestations’. ‘Since people may easily belong to several of these networks, individuals tend to develop their “portfolios of sociability” by investing differentially, at different points in time, in a number of networks with low entry barriers and low opportunity costs’, leading to ‘extreme flexibility in the expression of sociability, as individuals construct and reconstruct their forms of social interaction’, and perhaps also to fragility in the forms of social support they can rely on.³⁵²

Some online churchgoers do form strong and intimate friendships lasting many years; others visit a church briefly, or form intense short-term commitments. To some extent all of the churches studied in this thesis could be conceptualised as particularly concentrated focal points of sociality in one wide and loose network, for at least some members in each church are in regular contact with at least some members of the others, through Facebook, mutual friends or periodic shifts of membership. Indeed, some commentators have used ‘cyberchurch’ as a collective term for all online Christian activity, emphasising the network itself rather than particular online groups.³⁵³ From Castells’ perspective, what is most important about online churches is not necessarily their unique cultures and shared values; we

³⁴⁹ Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). pxxxii

³⁵⁰ Wellman, "Physical Place and Cyberplace." p228

³⁵¹ Castells, *The Internet Galaxy*. p127

³⁵² Ibid. p129

³⁵³ Patrick Dixon, *Cyberchurch: Christianity and the Internet* (Eastborne: Kingsway Publications, 1997). p17

should focus our attention instead on the networks of contacts and resources that these churches support and encourage, as sources of particular kinds of conversations and supportiveness.

Wellman's article 'Physical Place and Cyberplace' traces the evolution of sociability through two shifts. The first took place in the 19th and 20th centuries, between door-to-door communities based on neighbourhoods to place-to-place communities based on households. This change was made possible by new developments in technology and communication, like the telephone and car. The second shift, now gathering pace, focuses on the individual as the creator and maintainer of unique personal networks. 'Rather than fitting into the same group as those around them, each person has his/her own "personal community".'³⁵⁴ 'Connections are to people, not to places', and 'this shift facilitates *personal communities* that supply the essentials of community separately to each individual: support, sociability, information, social identities, and a sense of belonging.'

Wellman raises some concerns about the possible consequences of such connectivity. If 'people operate in a number of specialized communities that rarely grab their entire, impassioned or sustained attention'³⁵⁵, then while this emphasizes individual autonomy and agency it also 'may create an insecure milieu where no one fully knows anyone'. We should take into account both 'the decreased control over inhabitants' behaviour that each milieu has' and 'the decreased commitment of each milieu to its inhabitants' well-being.'³⁵⁶ 'This is not a *prima facie* loss nor gain in community, but rather a complex, fundamental transformation in the nature of community'.³⁵⁷

Before we move on from this discussion of online churches as digitally-supported networks and semi-bounded domains, one last consideration deserves mention. Wellman is careful to contextualise the rise of personalized communities within a historical progression between different kinds of networking, based on different basic units of sociality and different kinds of relationships. We should take note of this complexity and resist any temptation to contrast digitally-networked religion against an imagined past in which all

³⁵⁴ Wellman, "Physical Place and Cyberplace." p227

³⁵⁵ Barry Wellman, "The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 8, no. 3 (2003).

³⁵⁶ Wellman, "Physical Place and Cyberplace." p234

³⁵⁷ Wellman, "The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism"

religious resources were received within a single stable local congregation. Scholars researching everyday 'lived religion', like Meredith McGuire, remind us that individual religious belief and practice has always been complex, diverse, and constructed from a range of sources and authorities. McGuire's *Lived Religion*³⁵⁸ sadly contains no mention of the Internet, but echoes some of our discussion about networks. In her chapter on white southern evangelicals, for example, she argues that official and popular, approved and unapproved beliefs and practices are used 'in combination or separately, overlapping in layers, serially or simultaneously, hybridized and sometimes completely transformed', and that such fluid appropriation typifies 'nearly every sector of the religious population'.³⁵⁹ 'An individual's religion could include an elaborate combination of, say, a denominational tradition [...], the preaching of a nondenominational church leader and the particular congregational practices of a nondenominational church, beliefs and practices learned from television or radio evangelists, practices related to objects sold at Christian gift shops, and more.'³⁶⁰ The range of accessible sources and channels of information and encouragement is broadened by new media, with less reliance on geographical communities and all the changes and shifts discussed above, but the suggestion that individuals create their religions from diverse elements gleaned from many sources is nothing new. Even centuries ago, 'individuals' religious practices may have been far more diverse and complex, eclectic, and malleable than we have realized.'³⁶¹

THE FIRST DIMENSION: COPYING THE EVERYDAY

The previous section demonstrated something of the complexity of the relationship between online and everyday. New media are part of the everyday, the technological basis for the network society, and yet the distinction between online and everyday domains is often closely guarded by media users.

This relationship can be marked out along four dimensions, as explained at the start of this chapter. The first of these is the deliberate copying of features of everyday life in online churches. The five case studies reported here all showed many familiar elements, including

³⁵⁸ Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p67

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p95

³⁶¹ *Ibid.* p17

forms of organisation, visual design and liturgy. At the Cathedral of Second Life, ranks of wooden pews facing the altar and pulpit where the service leader – often dressed in Anglican vestments – delivers recorded music, prayers, responses and a sermon. These elements may be drawn from different sources, but the content of each is usually indistinguishable from what might be encountered in a local parish church. Other examples include the architecture of Church of Fools, the campus style of Church Online and the liturgical worship of St Pixels.

This reliance on the familiar recurs across many areas of online activity. The online journal *First Monday* published a special issue on virtual architecture in 2006, and contributors seem to share a sense of disappointment at the perceived lack of originality among virtual architects. Yehuda Kalay and John Marx claim that most worlds offer only ‘a cartoonish mimicry of physical spaces’, presenting ‘a poor environment for human inhabitation’ and failing to recognise ‘the fundamental differences between physical space and Cyberspace’, which is ‘free from physical constraints’ like gravity and weather.³⁶² Nathan Glazer also comments on ‘how conservative and traditional’ virtual spaces are, concluding that the best architects must be working elsewhere. Virtual worlds, he suggests, have not sparked much imagination in how to live: ‘it is not easy to overcome the strong taste for the comfortable, the known, the already experienced’.³⁶³ Kalay and Marx are more optimistic: ‘this state of affairs is temporary, characteristic of early adoption stages of new technologies’.

Observation of Second Life architecture in 2009 suggests that these comments remain largely valid. Passing years have not brought shifts in taste away from the known and familiar. We should not be too quick to condemn such conservatism, however, nor to confuse it with a lack of creativity. The case studies in this thesis have shown the great lengths to which online church designers will go to create memorable yet familiar spaces, and careful analysis of these practices of borrowing and copying suggests much positive value in adherence to established patterns.

Schroeder, Heather and Lee observed ‘E-Church’ in 1998, a charismatic group in an early 3D graphical world, and noted several familiar themes. Some features seemed to draw

³⁶² Yehuda E. Kalay and John Marx, "Architecture and the Internet: Designing Places in Cyberspace," *First Monday* Special Issue 5(2006).

³⁶³ Norman Glazer, "Architecture and the Virtual World," *First Monday* Special Issue 5(2006).

on televangelism, email and computer games, but E-Church language and ethos 'bear all the hallmarks of informal, interactive, charismatic-style worship'.³⁶⁴ The opening words evoke 'a well-established and, for charismatics, totally familiar 'frame' inviting participants to infer the kind of language and practices expected in the meeting.'

This quote suggests one possible motivation for such close adherence to offline forms. By incorporating elements of worship with which visitors are already familiar, leaders framed activity within wider patterns of norms and expectations into which visitors had already been socialized. The frame helps participants know what to expect and how to respond.

This analysis has been echoed and expanded by subsequent writers, including Nadja Miczek in 2008.³⁶⁵ Neither of the Second Life churches she studied tried to create any 'special online elements' in worship, innovating primarily through the creation of new ritual spaces – which themselves prominently feature combinations of familiar elements. Miczek sees this conservatism as intentional, designed to help congregations understand what is taking place: 'The continuance of ritual content and a great part of the structure guarantee that the ritual is recognised as a Christian service which the visitors can follow'.³⁶⁶

According to Stephen Jacobs, this incorporation of familiar forms is necessary. Commenting on one Christian and one Hindu website offering asynchronous ritual experiences, he observes that both are 'envisaged in terms of conventional notions of sacred space and ritual performance, rather than something radically new', and are 'highly conventional in their design'.³⁶⁷ Given the nature of ritual, this conventionality is 'hardly surprising':

If ritual is regarded as a form of communicative action, and sacred space is thought of in terms of a hermeneutic conversation between architectural forms and human actors, then both can be thought of as semiotic systems in which meanings are encoded.

³⁶⁴ Ralph Schroeder, Noel Heather, and Raymond M. Lee, "The Sacred and the Virtual: Religion in Multi-User Virtual Reality," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 4, no. 2 (1998).

³⁶⁵ Nadja Miczek, "Online Rituals in Virtual Worlds: Christian Online Services Between Dynamics and Stability," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 03, no. 1 (2008).

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p167

³⁶⁷ Stephen Jacobs, "Virtually Sacred: The Performance of Asynchronous Cyber-Rituals in Online Spaces," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3 (2007).

Consequently, meaning has to be encoded in a way that is recognisable to the interpretative community for whom it is intended.

Other commentators have suggested that framing religious activity as familiar is an attempt to offset features of the online context which might undermine spiritual experience. According to Randolph Kluver and Yanli Chen,³⁶⁸ the graphics of Church of Fools suggested games and cartoons and encouraged a distinctly light-hearted, disorderly atmosphere that the more sombre and traditional design elements sought to dispel:

The use of ambient sound, the spatial quality of the 3D church, and the presence of iconic representations of a church all contributed significantly to the sense of a recreation of a sacred space, but the technology itself led to some associations that were decidedly 'unholy'.³⁶⁹

According to Kluver and Chen, 'sacred space is constantly undermined by a general sense of levity in the design of Church of Fools despite the pains taken to create a credible "mediated presence" of being there in sacred space'. The Church 'was too much fun to evoke a sense of spirituality for some users.'³⁷⁰

The deployment of familiar elements alongside the playful and chaotic is perceived as an attempt to encourage a particular religious attitude. The 'curious melange of levity and gravitas'³⁷¹ encourages an individually-oriented, postmodern and anti-institutional spirituality, 'questioning and searching for the sacred in the midst of the profane'.³⁷²

Other scholars have highlighted the actual experience of media use as a crucial barrier to online 'sacred space'. Users are constantly aware that they are participating in a synthetic environment, a significant obstacle to any sense of immersion. According to Stephen O'Leary, 'ritual action in cyberspace is constantly faced with evidence of its own quality as constructed, as arbitrary, and as artificial, a game played with no material stakes or

³⁶⁸ Randy Kluver and Yanli Chen, "The Church of Fools: Virtual Ritual and Material Faith," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 03, no. 1 (2008).

³⁶⁹ Ibid. p131

³⁷⁰ Ibid. p131

³⁷¹ Ibid. p136

³⁷² Ibid. p134

consequences'.³⁷³ Lorne Dawson noted the scarcity of online religious experiences in 2005 and attributed this to the self-awareness of users: 'The medium seems to significantly heighten the reflexivity of participants in rituals, and this reflexivity can appear inimical to authentic religious practice.'³⁷⁴

These comments connect experience of the sacred with loss of self-awareness, losing oneself in the flow of time and so becoming open to experiencing something beyond and greater than the self. Can the 'collective effervescence' Durkheim speaks of be found in the constructed, synthetic realms of cyberspace?³⁷⁵ The point here is not, of course, that everyday social worlds and church architecture are not synthetic or offer some kind of unmediated immediacy. Communication between individuals is always mediated through socially-constructed forms, including proxemics, language and culture. The artificiality of such forms can recede from the foreground of awareness, however, because they are so familiar to us that they draw no attention, so ancient that they seem eternal, or so finely performed that we can attend to the meaning or moods conveyed instead of the mechanisms underlying the performance. Computer-mediated communication, in contrast, can seem incapable of this degree of unconsciousness.

Levity and familiarity can both be seen as responses to this challenge. By evoking familiar and time-honoured forms, users can participate in the perceived 'authenticity' of those older categories. Differences between the familiar and the digital copy can be disarmed through humour: participants can incorporate the challenge into their activity, affirm to one another that they have recognised it, and defuse its threat. When online churchgoers referred to offline activity as 'real life', they were not admitting that online life is 'unreal' but ironically appropriating a common critique levelled by 'outsiders'. Humour operates here to reassure and unite.

So far, we have considered the use of familiar elements as an attempt to make online religious activity recognisable, to convey expectations of appropriate behaviour, and to counter the 'unholy' associations and high levels of self-awareness connected with computer-

³⁷³ Stephen D. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (London: Routledge, 2004). p56

³⁷⁴ Lorne L. Dawson, "The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace," in *Religion and Cyberspace*, ed. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005). p16

³⁷⁵ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912)

mediated communication. A third important motive is theological: the desire to connect group activity with the sacred through divinely-authorized practices. LifeChurch.tv's online pastor, Brandon Donaldson, emphasizes the importance of persevering with tools and forms that God had already blessed with success. Continuity here plays a somewhat different role in discourse than in i-church, connected by its web pastor and diocese to the structures of the Church of England: LifeChurch is a young, independent organisation, and the emphasis on spiritual evidence of success generates confidence by framing the church as a participant in God's work.

Finally, relying on the familiar enables participants to take leadership roles without unusual levels of skill, talent and creativity. It is very difficult to design an architecturally striking, original yet effective building, or to write new liturgies for worship, or to compose new music, and not all leaders and volunteers of online churches have the time, training or ability to do so. Recombining what has already been proven to 'work' is a strategy accessible to a much broader pool of contributors.

This strategic appropriation of familiar elements has major limitations. Stephen Jacobs claims that the two websites he studied 'have not really explored the potential of the Internet', focusing on the well-known and so failing to explore what new and perhaps more effective forms could be achieved. Designers and users reported that 'virtual sacred spaces and the performance of online rituals lack something in relation to their "real world" counterparts', and Jacobs suggests that their reliance on the familiar contributed to this disappointment.³⁷⁶ Another objection has been noted in several chapters of this thesis: focusing on familiar church forms limits appeal to those who already know and love the forms copied, those who can see such references and be transported into the moods of spiritual awareness they associate with those spaces and times. For those who dislike that kind of churchgoing, don't know it, or are searching online for a new alternative, reliance on what some find 'familiar' can be confusing, tedious and unattractive. One striking observation throughout this thesis has been the lack of any appeal beyond those who now attend church or attended in the past, and the prevalence of familiar forms may be one important factor in this failure to reach new constituencies.

³⁷⁶ Jacobs, "Virtually Sacred."

THE SECOND DIMENSION: BECOMING PART OF THE EVERYDAY

Every visitor to an online church lives in a physical place and connects to the Internet using particular technology and software, and their participation in online Christian activity is integrated into particular patterns of daily routine, new media use and Christian practice. The online church is *a part of the everyday life* of the visitor, in five overlapping ways: *conceptual, material, social, digital and religious*.

Conceptual everydayness is the most basic and fundamental. For many users of digital technology, there is no such thing as ‘cyberspace’ or the ‘virtual’; new media are simply one area of ordinary existence. According to Castronova, the porousness of this membrane is such that ‘the allegedly “virtual” is blending so smoothly into the allegedly “real” as to make the distinction increasingly difficult to see.’ Users ‘have begun to see no line whatsoever between their online activities and their offline activities’, rejecting the online-offline distinction as a handicap to their understanding.³⁷⁷

Kate Boardman is a frequent visitor to online churches and a student of Second Life religion,³⁷⁸ and perfectly demonstrates this attitude. ‘I live in both the real and virtual worlds’, she has commented. ‘I don’t see them as separate. I don’t think we can, or will.’³⁷⁹ Note here the simultaneous appropriation and rejection of the ‘worlds’ metaphor, an indication of the complexity of user perceptions.

Richard Thomas makes a similar point in his i-church dedication homily in 2004.³⁸⁰ The rise of internet-mediated relationships has created a new context for Christian ministry, not by creating a new world demanding missionary intervention but by redefining the kinds of community that exist in everyday life:

³⁷⁷ Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*. p148

³⁷⁸ Kate Boardman, ‘The Word Made Virtual’ (unpublished essay submitted to Council for Ministry, Durham Diocese, as part of the ‘Living Theology Today’ lay education course, February 2008). http://files.blog-city.com/files/F05/93085/p/f/word_made_virtual.pdf. Accessed 10-01-10.

³⁷⁹ ‘A Message From DC: Kate Boardman’. Post to ‘Christianity in the Digital Space’ conference blog, 14-07 2009. <http://digitalsymp.blogspot.com/2009/07/message-from-dc-kate-boardman.html>. Accessed 10-01-10.

³⁸⁰ Richard Thomas, ‘i-church: Homily by Reverend Richard Thomas’, July 2004. http://web.archive.org/web/20040814025842/www.i-church.org/events/20040730_sd_sermontext.php. Accessed 28-10-2007.

we create new communities and develop new understanding not “in cyber-space” – that place does not exist, and the Church should not be promoting it as if it did – but through our internet-mediated relationships with real people who live in real places and live real lives, with all the pain and opportunities that presents.

This emphasis on real lives connects with the second level, *material* everydayness. I use the term *material* quite broadly here, referring to all the physical or embodied aspects of a person’s life engaged with online activity: connecting from a location, using computer equipment, physically typing, meeting another churchgoer face-to-face, or simply talking online about physical experiences.

The Anglican bishop N T Wright gave one of the keynote speeches³⁸¹ to *Christianity in the Digital Space*, a conference organised by Durham University’s CODEC research centre in 2009. Wright praised the Internet, but criticised online churches for avoiding the material world. ‘Community involves looking people in the eye’, he declared. Abstracting from the physicality of real life and creating a new self in another space suggested a new form of ‘cyber-Gnosticism’, motivated by hostility to the flesh. Cyberchurch risked a purely ‘intellectual’ Christianity that left congregants wanting: ‘it’s not easy to convey love to their bodies if they’re not actually there.’

This critique largely misses the embodied dimensions of Internet access and activity. Many participants, particularly in St Pixels and LifeChurch.tv’s Church Online, spoke of actually involving their bodies in their online worship. Far from seeking out a disembodied and anti-material religion, these participants sang aloud in time with music playing in services. Anthony, a Church Online regular, sang at his computer but tried not to wake his sleeping parents – one of the best examples I encountered of the embeddedness of ‘online’ activity in mundane, everyday, physical realities of access, location and context. In some cases, the body itself is brought directly into group communication – consider the use of webcams in Church Online LifeGroups, or the posting of photographs in St Pixels.

Wright’s charge of ‘cyber-Gnosticism’ also overlooks the importance of the body as a topic of discussion. Bodies are central to conversation in every church studied. Participants

³⁸¹ N T Wright’s speech can be viewed on YouTube in 8 parts, beginning at ‘Tom Wright @ DigiSymp’, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_eWRNkCo4s&feature=related. Accessed 10-01-10.

talk about their everyday lives, discuss the health of families and friends, and share anecdotes, happy occurrences and deep concerns. Community members respond with interest, support or similar stories of their own. One St Pixels forum post explains this integration of everyday life into online activity particularly well:

Blogs give members the opportunity to share parts of their lives, their joys, sorrows, worries, mountain top experiences or depth of the valley times. [...] other members in their turn are given the opportunity to respond, offer support, a word of congratulation or share a laugh. In simple terms, to share in the lives of others as people do off line.

Similar points could be made about ‘prayer’ and ‘praise’ threads or chatroom conversation. Heidi Campbell offers prayer as an example of the connection between online and offline in the email-based communities she studied, observing that ‘sharing real prayer needs enables members to become more aware of the lives of others, and consequently more invested in them’, and to form alliances based on agreement and shared perspectives.³⁸² Campbell also observed instances of material assistance, where prayer requests or personal needs were answered by mail or home visits, and the churches I studied also occasionally involved this kind of direct physical contact.

Anthony’s negotiation of the conflicting pressures of worshipping at home leads us to our next topic: the *social* everydayness of the Internet. Each Internet user is connected into a more-or-less rich network of contacts and relationships, including family, work colleagues and friends, and these connections are drawn into online life in a variety of ways.

A user’s social world may create issues of access. Time must be found for the online church in daily routine. Families may resent the encroachment of computer-mediated connections into the home, and some users during my research period gave up or scaled back their Internet activities to spend more time nurturing local connections. In other cases, online activity was valued as an escape, a safe space to express thoughts away from church or to enjoy adult conversation away from children, or as a replacement for warm and supportive connections completely missing in local life.

³⁸²Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005). p132

Other online churchgoers encourage their families to participate online or to attend face-to-face gatherings. I encountered married couples in i-church, St Pixels, LifeChurch.tv and Second Life. The integration of online and family life was most striking in St Pixels, where at least four mother-daughter pairs were registered and active during 2009 in addition to numerous married couples and three community romances. Involvement was usually more intensive for one party than the other. The less active partner would be aware of the other's online life, more or less warmly appreciative of it, and willing to log in and participate at least occasionally, but never became a daily contributor. I interviewed one such light user in 2007 at a gathering in Manchester. Her husband visited St Pixels constantly – it has 'taken over his life', she confessed – and she was willing to acknowledge the validity of online church, defend it to others and visit occasionally for worship, but for her the website simply 'didn't seem important'. Like many other family members of St Pixels regulars, she routinely attended face-to-face gatherings with her husband and children but spent very little time online.

Another form of engagement with the user's local social world is encouraged in LifeChurch.tv, where some couples served together as online volunteers or hosted Watch Parties in their own houses. The online broadcast would be shown on a big screen and friends and neighbours encouraged to join the group for a time of shared worship and conversation focused around that online content. Accounts like these demonstrate the conceptual everydayness of the Internet discussed above, with no clear boundary maintained between the 'synthetic domain' of the online church and the patterns of activity and relationship operating elsewhere in the life of the participant.

We must also consider *digital* everydayness. Online churches communicate through a broad range of media, from email and blogs to Facebook and MSN, and each individual connects to their online church as just one of a whole range of other online activities.

These observations recall the arguments of Wellman and Castells. Vast, diverse networks of specialized relationships, occasional contacts and varied information sources can be developed, maintained and called upon with ease through digital media, setting each individual at the centre of an always-accessible web of connections. 'Supportive convoys travel ethereally with each person', through mobile phones and other portable communication

devices.³⁸³ Social networking sites, instant messenger programmes and mobile phones are so integral to my own communication patterns that almost every connection I maintain operates at least to some degree through the digital. Throughout this thesis I have tried to avoid referring to churches with local congregations as ‘offline churches’, preferring other circumlocutions instead; the pastor and congregation of a church that meets in a building every week may well be very active online.

Facebook emerged during my research as a particularly significant arena for online churches. Rather than joining a Christian social network site like MyChurch.org, members contacted one another through Facebook and engaged with the full range of options made available in that space. Most simply add their online church contacts to their existing profile, reinforcing the social embeddedness discussed above. St Pixels members can join a Fan page and a range of groups, and have embraced some of the more popular Facebook games with great enthusiasm. A constant cycle of Facebook competitions, challenges and exchanges of assistance was much discussed in LIVE and at face-to-face meetings during my research. Members of other online churches seemed less focused on interacting as a community, preferring to engage with particular chosen friends.

The final dimension embedding online churches in everyday life is one of the most crucial: the *religious*. Online churchgoing is just one part of participants’ religious life, almost always combined with a range of other online and local Christian activities.

As I have tried to show, ignoring the significance of broader patterns of religious life can lead discussion dangerously astray. If we understand an online church as a part of a religious life, rather than a self-contained whole, then Bob Hyatt’s concerns about discipline and the development of virtue must be addressed quite differently. Virtue and character develop at the centre of an individual’s personal network of contacts and resources, only partly maintained through digital media.

Treating online churches as one part of a personal religious network fits closely with earlier research, including Heidi Campbell’s study of Christian email groups. The ‘overarching claim made by members’ was that ‘online community was a supplement to, not

³⁸³ Wellman, "The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism."

a substitute for, offline church involvement'.³⁸⁴ Resources and encouragement found online strengthened commitment to local involvement for some and connected others with global Christian issues. Members of one group studied 'charged online community and offline church with different roles or tasks', with friendship found online and teaching in the local congregation.³⁸⁵ Those who did not attend a local church were prevented from doing so by physical disabilities that made participation impossible, or dissuaded by negative experiences of church insensitivity.

My observations and interviews show that online churchgoers are also strongly committed to offline attendance, an analysis reinforced by surveys released by St Pixels, i-church and the Cathedral. A survey of 79 Cathedral members reported 83% attending a local church, but I didn't meet a single Second Life worshipper during my research who did not. The St Pixels 2008 user survey showed higher levels of involvement, with 43% of the 113 respondents attending a local church twice per month, 36% once, 15% occasionally and only 7% – 8 people – never attending at all. 69% considered St Pixels a valid replacement for offline churchgoing, but very few had actually left a local church; for the majority, this statement seems to have represented a willingness to accept such a decision if made by other community members rather than any intention to act on it themselves.

For many, online groups offer valuable opportunities missing from their local context. These individuals consider the online to be different from the local, in some respects superior to it, in others inadequate. The 2008 survey asked respondents to state whether online church or 'offline' church performed better with respect to a range of values:

³⁸⁴ Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*. p161

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p164

Compare St Pixels with offline church	St P better	Same	Offline better	No opinion
Diversity	72%	17%	5%	6%
Tolerance of difference	63%	24%	6%	7%
Accessible to all	61%	23%	9%	7%
Allowing me to be myself	49%	40%	5%	7%
Potential for making friends	37%	43%	14%	5%
Ability to trust other members	11%	52%	28%	9%
Opportunities to get involved	22%	31%	38%	9%

No question was asked about teaching – reflecting St Pixels culture, where theology is negotiated through discussion – but the features in which the online church performed better than offline all relate in some way to friendship, as Campbell found in her own study.

The 2006 i-church survey included questions about past church attendance. Around 110 of the 250 individuals then registered completed the survey. The web pastor’s report records that just over 65% of these individuals were attending a local church ‘regularly’ or ‘sometimes’ at the time of the study, but less than 3% said they had not attended ‘regularly’ at some point in the past and only 3 respondents said that they were not Christians. 25% described i-church as ‘my main church’, almost identical to the 28% who described St Pixels as ‘my main point of contact with organised religion’, but again most people responding in this way still attended a local church at least occasionally.

I did meet a number of people whose participation in local churches was severely constrained by disability, and several more who had attended only online church for a brief period in the past. Heather’s online engagement was motivated by a number of factors, including an injury that confined her to a wheelchair and made it painful to sit still, the lack of any local churches that appealed to her theologically, and the failure of those local churches to respond helpfully to her enquiries. She was able to type lying down, with her computer on a special sloping rest, and from that position she led online services several times each week. A quite different story came from Rob, who found moving jobs left him without time for church and then fell ill for three months. Rob was already a member of St

Pixels, but now slowly became aware that ‘this was *my* church’, where all his pastoral needs could be met. On returning to health he found a local church but remained involved with St Pixels. Other interviewees shared similar stories of temporary isolation, particularly caused by illness, moving jobs or switching churches; during such times, an online community provided the spiritual support, stability and fellowship that they needed, without becoming a permanent replacement.

The i-church survey asked those who had stopped regularly attending a local church to explain why, ticking all applicable boxes from a multiple-choice list. Half replied that ‘I do not need to belong to a building based church to live out my faith’ – just the kind of response that NT Wright, Bob Hyatt and other critics fear. We have no way to discern how many respondents answered this question, but this figure could represent around 25 people. The same number said their church failed to nourish them spiritually, one quarter felt unwelcome, one quarter too shy, one fifth disagreed with teaching or were unable to attend due to inadequate provision for their disability, and the remainder emphasised different forms of inconvenience such as time or travel. Actual inability to attend amounted for only a minority of these decisions to leave. Nonetheless, the basic points of my analysis remain: almost every member of an online church has had extensive experience of attending a local church, and the vast majority continue to do so at least occasionally. Even the sizeable minority who consider their online community to be their main church do usually continue to attend somewhere else as well.

THE THIRD DIMENSION: REMAINING DISTINCT FROM THE EVERYDAY

Online cultures can only be fully understood if we attend not only to their reproduction of and integration into everyday routines, locations, networks and practices but also to their separation from those ‘ordinary’ realities. This section reflects on this separation through two particularly important issues: the *social* separation of online community activity from life elsewhere and the *theological* conviction that ‘cyberspace’ is unfit for certain kinds of religious practice.

The everyday-yet-distinct nature of online churches is particularly clear when it comes to relationships, and we can see here both social and theological levels of distinction. Online friendships may be highly valued and considered fully ‘real’, but the chance to form those friendships and to pursue certain distinctive patterns of connection is made possible only by the media used. Online media permit the formation and maintenance of networks of contacts that are global in reach, accessible at any time, and can be pursued through a range of channels offering different bandwidths of communication, from the brevity of a Facebook status update or SMS to the relative media richness of a live webcam conversation. These may be ‘real’ friendships, but they are not identical to friendships maintained purely through face-to-face encounters.

Not all members share the perception that friendships within the online church community are part of their everyday social networks. For some, the value of the online group lies specifically in its separation from the local through pseudonymity and privacy; the online community must never discover the identity of the user, nor must family or work colleagues discover what occurs online. This attitude was rare, but concern for information control was a common theme: users wanted the power to decide if and when participants in the different domains of their lives start to discover about one another.

The previous section demonstrated that online and offline churches can be seen as complementary, serving different needs, and in some cases the different functions of the domains provide further motives for holding them distinct. Respondents to the 2008 St Pixels survey, for example, valued the diversity and honesty of their community. These values depend on separation from the local. St Pixels can only provide a safe haven for serious debates rejected at the local church, for example, because it relies on tolerance and diversity to provide opportunities for good conversation and on pseudonymity to keep ‘authentic’ thoughts safe from local censure.

The issue of relationships also raises *theological* issues. Douglas Estes notes that both supporters and critics of online churches consider this their strongest argument:

We expect a virtual church to have real, authentic fellowship and community in order to be a real, authentic local church. One of the most common questions one encounters whenever the subject of virtual churches comes up is whether a virtual

church can be a true community, and it is the biggest objection to virtual churches that sceptics seem to make.³⁸⁶

Bob Hyatt is one such sceptic, and argues that the distinctness of online domains, their separateness from face-to-face contact, lets users evade being truly 'known':

some say that online churches encourage more transparency in the chat rooms and virtual lobbies of internet campuses. But how is the pastoral care of prayer and recommending a good book, accountability, in-depth counselling, and church discipline practiced? Short answer: it can't be. Because of the nature of internet relationships, only what people choose to reveal will ever be known.³⁸⁷

As several case studies demonstrated, the separation of online from offline behind the protection of anonymity can encourage users to pursue behaviour strongly stigmatised in either domain. The 'sexual sin' so feared by some Second Life users is one good example, made easy and risk-free by the chance to act out desires and impulses without physical consequences. The 'griefing' pursued by hostile visitors to Church of Fools, LifeChurch and Second Life is also facilitated by the distinctiveness of an online domain, where a user can join a church congregation in fanciful attire, summon occult symbols to plague the worshippers and be swiftly banned from the area, all without any danger of violence to their person or reputation outside that domain. Social norms and values within one domain or network may differ from those within another; griefers may consider their own activities to be entirely within the 'rules of the game' and report them gleefully as sources of social and reputation capital within their own favoured networks, or consider the dismay they cause to be part of entirely justified protests against groups well deserving of such disruption.

The separation of different domains of activity is created and preserved by a range of practices, including segregation of time for private access, the creation of pseudonyms and personae and tight control over information sharing. One particularly striking example of the separation of worlds was Harriet, encountered already in the St Pixels chapter. Harriet designed an avatar that looked totally unlike her physical appearance, chose a pseudonym, gave misleading information regarding her location, and showed great concern regarding my

³⁸⁶ Estes, *SimChurch*. p57

³⁸⁷ Hyatt, 'There is NO Virtual Church (Part Two)'

research observations. She volunteered extensive information about her private life to explain why the different domains of her activity had to be kept separate, emphasising particular local situations and individuals that she wanted to avoid. She created a Facebook profile for her online self, using her St Pixels name and no photographs and engaging with great enthusiasm in a variety of St Pixels' favourite Facebook games. Maintaining more than one profile was theoretically banned by Facebook at that time, but creating new profiles offered a number of online churchgoers the chance to pursue their online connections without introducing different spheres of activity to the same communication space. This option was particularly popular among Second Life users, many of whom create a special profile for their avatars.

This separation of domains is not static and fixed. Over time, some of Harriet's concerns shifted. She finally agreed to start attending St Pixels meets and replaced her Facebook profile with another using her real name and including individuals outside the community. My own engagement with online communities has followed a similar pattern, from an initial insistence on pseudonymity and privacy, through increasing familiarity with new friends online, to attendance at a first meeting. Eventually I started research and decided that research ethics required openness and accountability. Different levels of trust, belonging, responsibility and offline commitments guided different stages of my negotiation of the available forms of pseudonymity or openness.

Many online church members fall between the extremes of everydayness and separateness, integrating their online communities into their everyday lives and speaking about them to their families and local churches but relishing the new opportunities they discover online. These new opportunities can include the chance to escape the constraints of disability, as we have seen.

I also encountered individuals using digital media to negotiate opportunities for Christian leadership and initiative not available to them in their local settings. This pattern appeared in two different forms: a search for access to mission fields perceived to be out of reach of existing local churches, and the expectation that the Internet could provide opportunities to create and lead projects not available in the individual's local area. Both forms are founded on the separation of online from local. It is because there is something different about Internet spaces and communities that these would-be leaders consider their online mission work to have a good chance of success. Those looking for a new mission field

argue that the Internet is accessed by hundreds of millions of people who never go to church or think about Christianity, and that creating church communities in a space where non-Christians are already so comfortable makes it as easy as possible for them to start inquiring about faith. Those looking for authority denied to them offline talk of escaping from the control of hierarchies who don't appreciate their gifts, or who don't understand the modern world, or from the physical disability and isolation that constrain their local activity.

The discussion above dealt with some of the *social* dimensions of the separation of worlds, looking at the mechanisms of such separation and the opportunities it affords, and raised the *theological* significance of relationship, community and pseudonymity. Before we move on, two more examples of theological distinctiveness should be introduced: “speaking in tongues” and (Holy) Communion. My interviewees considered the first impossible and were strongly divided on the second, but observation and published accounts demonstrate that both have occurred online.

Heidi Campbell discovered instances of ‘tongues’ in her study of the ‘Community of Prophecy’ email list, but offers only the barest description. Speaking of specifically religious ways of using text, like the ~ ~ \o/ ~ ~ emoticon designed to represent the author ‘in the river of God’, she reports that ‘lines of random keystrokes... may be used to represent glossolalia’.³⁸⁸ I have only encountered this once, in a prayer service at i-church in 2006. Worship at this time involved a small number of contributors, usually less than half a dozen, who would each contribute a few lines of spontaneous prayers. One new member visited for the first time, and when his turn came to pray he began to type, and type, posting line after line until alarmed private messages started to fly between the others in the room. Finally, he began typing what seemed to be random keystrokes, hitting his keyboard in a manner interpreted by those present as an electronic form of glossolalia – typing in tongues. This event was not repeated and the member in question left soon after.

I raised the issue of typing in tongues with members of online churches who described themselves as ‘charismatic’, but found no one willing to approve of such activity. According to one St Pixels member, speaking in tongues was a gift requiring what she experienced as surrender to the Spirit, an immediate connection to God. Mediating such presence through the

³⁸⁸ Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*. p117

conscious and deliberate act of typing would be a contradiction in terms – a search for mediated immediacy. For one LifeChurch member, the gift of tongues required interpretation by another person present, a moment constantly open to spiritual danger. She had experienced group prayer with tongues in a chatroom, but the interpretations offered were condemnatory and therefore ‘not of God’ and she would not risk witnessing such abuse again. It could well have been the anonymity and lack of visual contact found in a text chatroom that encouraged the ‘interpreter’ in this case to ignore the emotional consequences of their actions.

Online communion is rather easier to find, as described in my literature review, but was also very rare among the churches I have studied. Only LifeChurch.tv has held an online communion service, doing so about once each year. In St Pixels and i-church online communion was discussed repeatedly in the first years of community life but never gained acceptance. I analysed some of these conversations in my Masters thesis, and found that many members of both groups had threatened to leave outright if any experimentation was undertaken. Some of those who understood the Eucharist as the Real Presence of God claimed that an online form would be both impossible and insulting. Some evangelicals also shared this view, arguing that online Eucharist broke the specific commands of Jesus. The argument subsided, primarily because the harmony and diversity of each group was valued too highly to risk disaster. Almost all participants were already receiving communion in their local churches, another factor that may have eased the urgency of the issue.

The theology underlying communion is also crucial to its acceptance as part of LifeChurch.tv’s Church Online. Communion does not occupy a high profile in the weekly life of LifeChurch.tv campuses; tables of grape juice and wafers are distributed around the auditorium so that any member can help themselves whenever they wish, but the practice only rarely enters the actual official structure of the Experience. An annual Experience does emphasise the importance of Communion, however, and on those occasions Church Online encourages its visitors to join in. On February 18th 2009, for example, the church blog announced an upcoming opportunity to ‘Remember With Us’.³⁸⁹ Communion ‘is something we encourage all the followers of Jesus in our community to participate in’, the writer explains, but doing so requires physical participation. ‘We would encourage you to consider

³⁸⁹ Tony Steward, ‘Remember With Us: Communion’, Church Online Blog, 18-02-09. <http://internet.lifechurch.tv/2009/02/remember-with-us-communion/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

preparing and having your own elements ready (like bread and juice/wine) for the experience.’ Readers are encouraged to treat this as an opportunity to invite their families and friends ‘to join you in the practice of communion’ if those contacts are far away, reuniting relationships separated by distance through online ritual – adding another theological interpretation to the event. There are only two responses to this blog, but both emphasise the connectedness made possible by the event: ‘I get so excited when we as an online community are also able to experience refreshing love of Christ through communion.’

For LifeChurch, communion is an event reinforcing the status of Church Online as an ordinary part of the LifeChurch Campus system and a moment to celebrate and perform the relationships between families and friends. For St Pixels and i-church, Eucharist is quite the contrary: an event that marks one point of absolute difference between online and offline church, and a central part of Christian practice that must be avoided altogether if the community is to survive. Several core members of both groups explained to me that they did not believe their community was a church at all, despite their investment in group activity and relationships, because the Eucharist was so central and indispensable to their understanding of what ‘church’ means.

THE FOURTH DIMENSION: BECOMING DISTINCTIVELY ONLINE

Online churches are also developing their own styles and practices. Some of these distinctive activities owe much more to other areas of the Internet than to everyday churchgoing, and are appropriated and negotiated by online churches in context-specific and sometimes surprising ways. I discuss three key examples here: the adoption of an ever-increasing range of online media in the primary church space, the growth of channels of communication elsewhere online, and the emergence of distinctive patterns of online church leadership.

i) MOVING AWAY FROM THE FAMILIAR?

Each church showed some kind of progression over time away from initial reliance on the familiar. In some cases this was very slight. The Cathedral of Second Life, for example,

has redesigned some aspects of island architecture to concentrate more on ease of access and use than on faithful reproduction. The conference centre is now reduced to two floors connected by a ramp, with walls, roof and staircase removed. In other groups, the shift is much more obvious. Church of Fools and i-church have both started to use blogs and multimedia content. The development of LifeChurch from Internet Campus to Church Online included considerable efforts to relax its reliance on the campus model, introducing new tools and options and installing an open chatroom during the Experience.

Douglas Estes argues in *SimChurch* that reliance on the familiar is a temporary stage in online religion. Online churches are ‘coming out of their shells – the shells of the real-world traditions that launched them.’³⁹⁰ The decision to build a cathedral in Second Life, for example, reflects what congregations need to see ‘at this early stage in the process’; to succeed in future, online churches must create new forms of worship that make better use of the full potential of the Internet. This is ‘the beta phase’ of online religion, the experimental testing stage before a product is released.³⁹¹ I have repeatedly argued that familiarity and the reproduction of traditional forms are much more than a temporary phase, but it does appear that online churches move beyond the familiar to some degree as they mature. Over time, leaders and congregations come to understand online media better and to appreciate what aspects of their practice could be abandoned, improved or adjusted, and start to experiment more widely with new ways of communicating or worshipping.

These new developments are not examples of pure innovation, and can often be understood as a broadening of the ‘familiar’ to include new online media and communication styles that leaders and congregations are becoming more comfortable with. When LifeChurch chose to introduce a chatroom alongside its Experience broadcasts, for example, it became possible for visitors to engage in practices already very common elsewhere online. Tom Boellstorff argues that ‘virtual selfhood is becoming predicated on the idea that people can craft their lifeworlds through intentional creativity’,³⁹² and offering opportunities for visitors to engage with and shape their own experience of Church Online through conversation can be seen as another example of that same idea.

³⁹⁰ Estes, *SimChurch*. p107

³⁹¹ Ibid. p109

³⁹² Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*. p24

The actual culture of Experience conversation has emerged from the interaction of these online practices with the existing culture of LifeChurch. In the chatroom, just as in a local campus, criticism and debate of Craig Groeschel's preaching is discouraged, contributors are overwhelmingly enthusiastic about LifeChurch and those who are not identified by regulars as born-again Christians are challenged to commit to Jesus – but we can also observe idle chat about who lives where, questions entirely unrelated to the message, startling confidences exchanged between strangers and a considerable degree of heckling.

ii) DEVELOPING NEW CHANNELS OF COMUNICATION

All of the churches studied made broad use of digital media away from their primary online location. I discussed the informal use of media for communication between group members above but focus here on official activity. Group leaders have created additional websites, Facebook groups, YouTube channels, MySpace pages, blogs, Twitter accounts and more. LifeChurch.tv has created numerous online sites and channels to promote its work and resource its many campuses, including Church Online. Its YouTube channel, for example, includes over 90 short video clips, the majority originally used in Experiences.³⁹³ Most recorded less than 1000 views by the end of 2009, but a few had amassed 30 000 or more. Some 18 000 'fans' had joined the LifeChurch Facebook page by the same date, receiving regular updates on LifeChurch teaching, questions to consider, and space to post their own thoughts, reflections and queries.³⁹⁴ Updates might link to other digital contributions, including YouTube videos or blog posts.

These efforts are partly designed to attract new members, but the emergence of constellations of online activity can also deepen engagement of existing members with their online community. Churches who distribute material through many channels that members use regularly can develop a near-constant presence in their lives. Those who register as Facebook fans of LifeChurch.tv, for example, are presented with a constant stream of updates that seek to challenge, inspire, and encourage the sharing of uplifting stories. These updates encourage participants to feel part of and connect with the group, and also aim to help them to leverage their existing online networks of connections to advertise the church and its message. A simple button press can publish a pre-worded advert as a Facebook status

³⁹³ 'LifeChurch.tv's Channel', <http://www.youtube.com/user/LifeChurchtv#g/>. Accessed 10-01-10.

³⁹⁴ 'LifeChurch.tv Fan Page'. <http://www.facebook.com/lifechurchtv?ref=ts>. Accessed 10-01-10.

message or Twitter post, informing all that person's friends and contacts whenever an Experience begins online.

The video-sharing website GodTube.com posted an interesting publicity video to mark the occasion of its relaunch as 'tangle.com',³⁹⁵ based on this philosophy of constant connection.³⁹⁶ 'We need to be wrapped up in our faith 24 hours a day', the new CEO explains, 'always reaching out to others', integrating a Christian faith into every aspect of life. The video closes with a series of black-and-white still images of people, each gradually becoming entangled by the green vines of the tangle.com logo. The site aims to help its community see all of life from a Christian angle, sharing all the things they care about, from music to movies. 'The goal of the tangle community is to get 'tangled' up in fellowship, purpose, meaning, and the Vine, Christ.'³⁹⁷ The concept of 'tangling' can be usefully applied to the ubiquity of digital media in everyday life. By creating a presence in many different spaces and communication channels, churches – both online and local – can seek to 'entangle' themselves across the everyday lives of members.

iii) AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP ONLINE

These discussions of new media have sought to demonstrate some of the ways in which online churches have begun to move beyond simply reproducing what happens in a local congregation. One other example is particularly important, and has received some attention from scholars of religion and new media: the growth and transformation of leadership and authority online.

Existing research has suggested that the Internet may undermine pre-existing forms of religious authority. Digital media could be used to spread misinformation and slander,³⁹⁸

³⁹⁵ 'Tangle', www.tangle.com. Accessed 10-01-10.

³⁹⁶ 'GodTube is now tangle', 3rd February 2009.

http://www.tangle.com/view_video?viewkey=fa530b0cc587db36bec8. Accessed 10-01-10.

³⁹⁷ 'What is tangle?'. <http://tangle.zendesk.com/forums/59360/entries/49823>. Accessed 10-01-10.

³⁹⁸ Massimo Introvigne, "So Many Evil Things: Anti-Cult Terrorism via the Internet," in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, ed. Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan (London: JAI Press, 2000).

facilitate contact with outsiders and ex-members of new religious movements,³⁹⁹ or give greater significance to independent grass-roots activity.⁴⁰⁰ Heterodox and hot-tempered exchanges on religious lists and sites could damage a group's public image.⁴⁰¹ On the other hand, opportunities have also been noted for religious leaders to strengthen their control by communicating directly with followers around the world.⁴⁰²

Clearly this is a complex issue. The kinds of authority that flourish in a religious group will depend on many factors, including theology, group history and dominant personalities as well as the communication opportunities offered by the Internet. Nonetheless, some scholars have suggested that general trends will emerge. According to Jeff Zaleski, writing in 1997, 'It's possible that in the long run the Internet will favour those religions and spiritual teachings that tend toward anarchy and lack a complex hierarchy.'⁴⁰³ Helland's concepts of 'online religion' and 'religion online' reflect a more recent version of the same idea: 'Hierarchies and networks are two very different systems and the Internet was really only designed for one of them.'⁴⁰⁴

My research has demonstrated that online churches can generate very different kinds of leadership and external support, and indicated some of the theological, social, technological and historical factors lying behind those structures. In some groups, religious leadership has indeed lost significance. St Pixels, for example, encourages diverse discussion and has no pastor or doctrinal creed. If we were to look only at the first four case studies it might seem that Zaleski and Helland are correct: these are communities of open debate, and even the Anglican diocese that oversees i-church does not regulate what teachings members may espouse.

³⁹⁹ Eileen Barker, "Crossing the boundary: new challenges to religious authority and control as a result of access to the Internet," in *Religion and Cyberspace*, ed. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).

⁴⁰⁰ Lorne L. Dawson, "Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies," in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, ed. Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan (London: JAI Press, 2000).

⁴⁰¹ David Piff and Margit Warburg, 'Seeking for Truth: Plausibility Alignment on a Baha'i Email List', in M.T. Højsgaard and M. Warburg (eds.), *Religion and Cyberspace* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005)

⁴⁰² Barker, "Crossing the Boundary."

⁴⁰³ Jeff Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology is Changing Our Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997). p111

⁴⁰⁴ Christopher Helland, "Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 01, no. 1 (2005). p13

As LifeChurch.tv demonstrates, however, it is entirely possible for an online church to flourish with a powerful hierarchy and a strictly-regulated theological message. There is very little to indicate that such forms of control will not continue to thrive in future. Wellman argues that in networked societies 'hierarchies can be flatter and more recursive',⁴⁰⁵ and this is highly relevant to the churches I have observed: hierarchies do tend to be flat, with much direct communication between leaders and congregants, and limited to one or two levels. At Church Online, the visitor hears directly from Craig Groeschel, looks into his eyes as he gazes into the camera, reads regular blog updates from Brandon Donaldson, and can talk to volunteers and staff in the chatroom. In i-church the hierarchy of Pastor, Trustees and diocese is somewhat more complex, but operates largely behind the scenes; the web pastor can be spoken with directly. A large degree of the controversies discussed in that chapter can be traced to suspicion of unknown powers.

The churches studied all show certain common patterns of leadership. Each was founded by a leader or leadership team with considerable prior experience of ministry, and flourished best under leadership that combined this with enthusiasm for new media and experience of online religious community. Some of these leaders, particularly those I encountered in Second Life, began investigating particular locations or media specifically in order to explore possibilities for mission work and church planting. Others, like Richard Thomas, Simon Jenkins and the leadership of LifeChurch.tv, had already witnessed something of the potential of the Internet for creating religious communities and spiritual experiences. The presence of so many online leaders with ministry experience should not be surprising. Successful online ministry requires much the same skills that would be required of a successful local leader, including a talent for exciting communication, warmth, pastoral sensitivity and organisational ability.

Two other kinds of online leadership proved much less successful. The skills of online ministry are not identical to those needed in a local setting, and not all leaders with prior ministry experience flourished. I encountered a number of individuals with offline leadership experience who simply did not understand new media, did not understand people who used

⁴⁰⁵ Wellman, "Physical Place and Cyberplace." p227

new media and did not like what new media was being used for. These would-be leaders were drawn online by a desire to lead and influence others, not by any enthusiasm for new media as such or any experience of how such media might best be used.

I also encountered a large number of individuals who were not sponsored by any church and had no experience of church leadership. These individuals sometimes described themselves as de-churched, and in each case local church authorities had refused to give them leadership, ordination, or approval. The Internet offered them a chance to become something they felt ‘called’ to be, but had been unable to achieve locally: recognition as a valuable, important Christian leader.

This last category shows some parallels with patterns identified by Douglas Cowan in *Cyberhenge*, a study of online paganism.⁴⁰⁶ Cowan describes the Internet as ‘an intermediate venue to ‘try on’ one’s identity’⁴⁰⁷, a space for individuals to experiment with ‘modern Paganism’ without committing to revealing that identity offline. Investment in these online roles is differently organised and performed and less intense and risk-laden than in a local equivalent, Cowan suggests, where face-to-face rejection and ridicule might have more serious consequences. Activities and patterns observed among pagans may not recur among Christians, but in this case a number of similarities can be seen. The self-appointed ‘online missionary’ can be understood as ‘trying on an identity’, hoping to achieve a particular role that they consider important and valuable – not the passer on of wisdom, in this case, but the great evangelist.

These would-be leaders were, almost without exception, hugely disappointed. Those hoping for a new start claimed that the online church was just as ‘hierarchical’ and ‘oppressive’ as any other, that church leaders still didn’t recognise their gifts, and that no one wanted to listen to them. In a number of cases a cyclical story seemed to emerge, where one individual moved through many different local and online churches, seeking authority and failing to find it on each occasion.

⁴⁰⁶ Douglas E. Cowan, *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid. p158

In the most successful groups, leadership was shared among a supportive team who combined talents for new media development, media use, organisation skills, pastoral sensitivity and communication. All five churches eventually reached such a combination, with web developers, experienced church leaders and enthusiastic volunteers working closely together. The presence of an offline Christian organisation like LifeChurch.tv, the Church of England or the Methodist Church can be an enormous benefit to an online church through provision of funding, leadership experience, good reputation and good content, but these resources are put to best effect when these organisations work closely with media experts, pastors and volunteers in the community and give the group freedom to discover its own principles of best practice.

Online churches may herald another significant development for religious authority, noted in my chapter on LifeChurch.tv. Where LifeChurch.tv might once have raised its profile and spread its message through books, CDs, leadership conferences or radio and TV shows, it can now broadcast Experiences around the world and encourage other churches to download free material. Such developments could power the rise of a new generation of internationally-renowned preachers. Websites, blogs and podcasts have already demonstrated the potential for an independent figure or organisation to catch global attention; should online campus congregations grow from thousands to hundreds of thousands, as Craig Groeschel predicts, then their pastors may become figures of cultural and religious significance at a national or global level. At the very least, a new cohort of ‘online campus pastors’ – figures like Brandon Donaldson, combining technical with ministry experience – seems likely to rise to prominence among those large churches around the world that adopt the campus model.

CONCLUSION

Online churches now offer worship, fellowship, prayer, discussion and preaching through almost every available digital medium. Common themes and characteristics can be discerned, but these are developed and combined in a great variety of ways, driven by theology, group history, key personalities, oversight and resources. This thesis has explored those diverse, unique processes of negotiation through long-term ethnography, allowing key themes and concerns to emerge from observations and interviews.

Seven particularly significant common themes were identified, but the specific forms of those themes in each church could be surprising. Worship, for example, can take a much less significant role than one might expect to find in a local church. Members of i-church, St Pixels or the Cathedral may take a very active role in community life and conversation without ever attending services, while some at Church Online preferred to view recorded LifeChurch Experiences from the website archive. Friendship was central to the first four churches studied, but not to LifeChurch, where many favoured a less relational definition of “community”. Other themes proved more consistent: all five churches reproduced familiar church patterns and styles, although their blending of offline and digital forms tended to grow more complex and diverse over time, and almost all participants combined online with local church attendance.

In my final chapter, I developed these common themes into a framework for analysis. Paying attention to each of the seven issues was important, but once data was collected a sharper tool was needed to demonstrate how each church had negotiated the different pressures, resources and opportunities shaping its development. I recommended attention to the four dimensions relating the digital to the everyday – copying, becoming part of, remaining distinct from, becoming online – and showed how each dimension gave insights into my observations.

These discussions indicate a number of directions for future research. First, of course, the online church continues to evolve. Researchers must continue to chart developments, looking particularly at the growth of online campuses and local “network churches” using material sourced from the Internet.

Second, I suggested that online campuses could encourage the development of new generations of high-profile preachers and online community managers. Online authority is changing, and considerable attention should be paid to the ways in which power is asserted, accepted, challenged and negotiated. If the Internet does affect religious authority, it is likely to be in subtle and hard-to-track ways, felt over time as individuals connect with online and local resources and networks to explore and assert their religious commitments.

Third, this study has included much information about the lives of individual participants but focused mainly on describing group cultures. Companion work should be undertaken to investigate how each participant blends their local and online church affiliations with other resources and networks. This line of research will gain significance as the impact of online activity on local church congregations continues to increase.

I will also mention two limitations. First, this study has focused exclusively on English-language churches and scholars. This allowed me to set aside consideration of different cultures of religion and Internet use, and cost very little in terms of analytical completeness – the groups studied showed little if any awareness of non-English-speaking online churches. It would be fascinating to see what differences might emerge between different nations and languages, and further work in this area should be encouraged.

Finally, this study did not significantly address issues of gender, class or generation. These important areas seemed to me to require prior work, examining group cultures – as I have done in this study – before investigating specific dynamics within them. Future research should explore how these demographic factors affect participation levels, styles of activity, motivations and experiences.

In the 25th year of the online church, the interested observer can find a dizzying maze of online parishes, projects, prayer chapels and campuses, displaying the widest range of media, designs and styles. Common themes and challenges are encountered right across the field of online religion, but each project develops its own unique response to the personalities, resources, skills and experiences offered by founders and participants. As new media are created, new leaders trained and new audiences made comfortable with computer communication, we can expect to see further flourishing and transformation among online congregations. I make no prediction about the future growth of online religion, but its continued vitality and interest seems assured.

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