



Meaningful communities: The growth of virtual churches



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In a world like this, media can help us to feel closer to one another, creating a sense of the unity of the human family which can in turn inspire solidarity and serious efforts to ensure a more dignified life for all ... We need to resolve our differences through forms of dialogue which help us grow in understanding and mutual respect ... Media can help us greatly in this, especially nowadays, when the networks of human communication have made unprecedented advances. The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God.¹

Pope Francis

Forming an online community

I have been involved in online Christian communities, including online churches, since the internet became easily accessible to home computer users in the 1990s. My first experience of online church was in 2004 when I participated in Church of Fools, a short-term experimental online church created by the team behind Christian online magazine *The Ship of Fools*.² Users chose a figure known as an *avatar* to represent them on-screen when they logged in, and could move their avatar round the pictorial representation of a traditional church interior, complete with a basement coffee bar. Avatars could interact with each other on-screen through typed text appearing in speech bubbles above their heads. They could also use a range of religious gestures, including kneeling to pray and raising the hands in worship. The Church of Fools 3D site was hugely popular. When the 3D experiment ended, the Church of Fools community, which had formed among people who used the site, continued to meet on a site with discussion forums and a chatroom, where worship continued. This community eventually became known as

St Pixels.³ Another online church, i-church,⁴ was started around the same time by the Diocese of Oxford. Although i-church did not have a virtual church building, it had a strong identity based around the concept of an online Benedictine community and being part of the Church of England.

I know many other Christians who are involved in online mission and ministry, but in the wider church there is still a lot of suspicion, and even fear, about exploring ways of using the digital communications that are now available to us as part of our calling to make disciples. Since I became involved in online church, I have received numerous requests from students, journalists and researchers for information about online Christian communities, but there is often an undercurrent of scepticism to these requests.⁵ It was partly to address this reluctance to explore the use of digital media as tools for mission that I wrote my first book, *Online Mission and Ministry*. As I noted in the book, objections to online church are often rooted in our understanding of what 'church' and 'community' mean:

A theologically correct answer to 'How do you do church online?' might be 'By the grace of God and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, in common with all Christian communities', but in addition to sounding pious and impractical, it doesn't tell people what they really want to know. I have realized that what underlies the question ... is something less theological and more practical. What people really want to know is: how can people be in community with each other if they are not physically proximate to one another?⁶

When I started to access the internet in the 1990s, my first impression of the worldwide web (the network of websites which link to each other via the internet) was of a giant noticeboard, where people posted information in the hope that others would read it. It may be this sense of internet as a carrier of information that makes the

friendships were formed that extended into real life, and there were the same arguments, fallings out and reconciliations that mark any community. As Krotoski points out, online relationships can be as meaningful and durable as any other.

If we accept that community can form online, can we ever call such a community a church? Even if an online community is formed with the intention of being a church, is there something about online community, where people are physically separated and linked only by electronic signals, which prevents it from being a church? And what might online church – if it can be said to exist – mean for the church as a whole?

A ministry of presence

In her intriguing book *Technobiophilia*, digital pioneer Sue Thomas explores the relationship between humans, nature and the online world. She describes how metaphor is used to talk about cyberspace – which, in itself, is a metaphor likening the digital environment to the vastness of outer space – and how the language used draws parallels with the natural world. For example, we talk of information *clouds*, *streams* of data and computer *viruses*. She posits that cyberspace ‘has presented us with a new landscape which, while inarguably virtual, is also deeply resonant of the physical’.⁸ Writing from a non-religious standpoint, Thomas nonetheless says that ‘the experience of entering cyber space [is] intense and even sometimes life-changing ... Many people encounter a powerful sense of presence within its abstract environs.’⁹ Christians like me, who have felt this powerful sense of presence online, have been inspired by a missional impulse, sharing a sense of calling to evangelise, or Christianise, the ‘place’ where we experience it.

The internet has no geographical location. It is made up of a network of connections between computers in different places, and cannot be seen to be a place in any literal sense of the word. Yet the terms we use to talk about digital communication imply that we are experiencing ‘being online’ as being in a specific location. We *go* online, we create virtual *worlds* and *visit cyberspace*. If we think of the internet as a place, even if we can’t pinpoint its physical location, it is a short step to seeing the digital space as a place which needs a Christian presence. Just as old-style missionaries built churches, so people seeking to evangelise the digital world have sought to build ‘churches’ online.

Of course, there is no possibility of having a solid, tangible church building in a virtual world but some online churches, such as the (now defunct) Church of Fools¹⁰ and the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life,¹¹ have been formed around digital artefacts representing church buildings. These artefacts are virtual, not tangible; they can only be seen on a computer screen and visited by avatars representing the people who control them. Just like the offline church, the online church is made ‘church’ by the nature of the community that meets there and draws its identity from its habitual meeting place.

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concept of ‘online community’ difficult to grasp without experiencing it. It is hard to understand how ‘community’ can form between a person who posts information online and the person who comes along later and reads it. We have also been primed by many predictions of the dystopian future which awaits us as we become more reliant on the use of the internet and less willing to engage in relationships with people around us. Yet the reality is that digital communications have enhanced our relationships with those who are not geographically close to us. Costly long-distance telephone calls have been replaced by instant messaging services such as Skype and FaceTime, and online forums create a way of ‘meeting’ and talking to people who share your interests, even if they live at a distance from you.

While caring for an ill relative, I discovered online discussion forums where I could converse with people across the world and – importantly, when I was often awake in the night – in different time zones. These included online Christian discussion boards, where participants from a wide range of backgrounds discussed faith and its interface with society. These online conversations could be passionate, and offered critiques of contemporary Christianity that I wasn’t hearing in my own church, both from Christians and non-Christians. It is no exaggeration to say that this dialogue was an important part of my Christian formation. It gave me a sense of how people outside the church viewed Christianity and allowed me to develop a form of apologetics that answered their real, and sometimes vehement, objections to it.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that debates about faith were the only thing that kept me going back to discussion forums. There was also a sense of community which arose through gathering around a shared interest, just as it does in an offline group. In her book *Untangling the Web*, social psychologist Aleks Krotowski describes her own experience of community among people who play games online: ‘What happens online is weirdly like offline social life. There are community rules and regulations. People develop a strong sense of belonging that can influence what they do and what they think offline. There are cool groups and the ones you don’t want to be associated with. And these groups, these communities, are anything but short term. There are groups of strangers who have known each other online for over twenty years.’⁷

Within the groups I belonged to, birthdays were celebrated, prayer was asked for and received,

NOTES

1. J Mulerikkal, ‘Internet is Good: Pope Francis’, available at www.theologyofinternet.com/2014/01/31/internet-is-good/

2. www.shipoffools.com

3. www.stpixels.com

4. www.i-church.org

5. The possible reasons for such scepticism are explored in ‘Theological Understandings, ch. 2 of my book *Online Mission and Ministry: A Theological and Practical Guide* (London: SPCK, 2015), pp. 11–25.

6. *Ibid.*, pp 5–6.

7. A Krotoski, *Untangling the Web* (London: Faber, 2013), p. 50.

8. S Thomas, *Technobiophilia: Nature and Cyberspace* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 11.

9. *Ibid.*

10. A selection of news stories about the Church of Fools can be found at www.churchoffools.com/news-stories/index.html

11. <https://slangcath.wordpress.com/>

12. For a detailed discussion of online sacraments see my *Online Mission*, p. 22f.

13. D Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), p. 93.

Despite the virtual nature of the church artefacts, the people who meet in the virtual church are real, even if they are linked digitally through computers and mobile devices rather than by physical proximity. Apart from the sacraments,¹² many of the activities we might expect in a church can be done equally well by people who are linked digitally. A prayer circle which operates by sending prayer requests around by phone to members, who then pray individually, in different places, is arguably no more or less 'real' than an online church's prayer forum where people post requests that are then prayed for individually by those who read them in different places.

In some cases an online church may offer someone their only possibility of being part of a Christian community, and in others may offer supplementary activities that are not available to them through their offline church. For example, a group of rural churches could offer a 'virtual house group' or Bible study where travel was difficult or hazardous. Some people may feel that the absence of sacraments demonstrates that an online church is not a church, whereas others believe that an online church made up of Christians who are committed to praying, worshipping, learning and journeying in faith together should be regarded as no less 'real' than an offline church whose members meet physically for worship but then are sent back out into the world separately to 'go in peace to love and serve the Lord'.

In his book *SimChurch*, American author, pastor and scholar Douglas Estes says: 'Anyone involved in virtual-world ministry knows that people will ask the hard questions, the real questions, the questions that need to be answered, much more freely in the virtual world than the real world ... In a very real sense, this loosening of inhibition could allow a person a starting point for becoming a fully devoted disciple of Christ in the virtual world better than the real one. But to guide people in this process authentic virtual churches, not just websites with static (and often outdated) information are necessary.'¹³

The worldwide web is dominated by search engines. If people are seeking Christ, they need to be able to find him. If we believe Christ to be present in communities of believers, then to enable people to encounter Christ online, we must form Christ-centred communities there.

The idea of an online church seems to be particularly attractive to people who are looking for something that they have not yet found offline. For those people, online church can be the start of a journey which leads them to a local church fellowship. For some, the attraction is simply accessibility and availability. At the start of i-church, its point of attraction for many users was the presence of a web pastor, a minister who was licensed by the Diocese of Oxford and dedicated to the service of the online community, giving far more accessibility to a minister than one in an offline church can manage. For others, online church might provide additional fellowship and teaching to supplement what is available to them elsewhere. Some seek out online church because they want to know more about Christianity, or have spiritual issues they want to discuss, without taking the risk of going to a church in their locality. Some seek out help,

prayer, pastoral care and consolation. Some have been hurt by their offline church, or by Christians, and are looking for a way to offload their anger and pain. Some come along to mock Christians because they dislike Christianity, or simply think it will be fun. And some come because they feel a sense of calling to be part of a Christian community online, what we might call a ministry of presence.

People often arrive in i-church and ask us 'the hard questions' on our public website, which is read by many more people than ever post there. As a community, we are dealing with these delicate questions in front of an unknown audience, some of whom may be equally keen to see the answers. People post requests for prayer

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support in the most difficult of times – for example, the partner of a patient waiting for a liver transplant asked us to accompany him in prayer. Community members walk alongside others in prayer for as long as it is needed. To sustain ourselves as a Christian community, we run study groups and prayer and worship sessions in the chatroom which are open to everyone. We also aim to provide a quiet space online where people can be heard and, more importantly, listened to, and start to understand what it is like to be part of a Christian community.

The internet holds specific challenges, in particular people who join a site to play destructive games for their own entertainment. It is part of my role as pastor to guard the community from being harmed by malicious 'wolves' who seek to demolish the community. Conflict among Christians about church controversies can be very fierce online since people often feel freed up by the relative anonymity of the internet to be more outspoken and angrier than they are in church meetings. It is no accident that the first chapter I wrote for my book was entitled 'Dealing with difficult and disruptive people!'

Conclusion

Apart from the benefit to individuals of online churches, they have a greater role to play as part of the body of Christ. Online church is not a competitor to offline church, but an extension of it. When thinking about using the internet for mission, we may jump to the conclusion that it will enable us to access many more people than we can do offline. But, online or offline, the church is built and held together by relationships between the saints and Jesus himself. Digital communications give us the opportunity to form more relationships and deepen existing ones. There is no limit other than our imaginations in how we might use these new communication opportunities to reach people.