

Simone Heidbrink, Nadja Miczek (Eds.)

Aesthetics



and the Dimensions of the Senses

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THE POLITICS OF FAMILIARITY
VISUAL, LITURGICAL AND ORGANISATIONAL CONFORMITY IN THE
ONLINE CHURCH

TIM HUTCHINGS

1 - Introduction: Studying the Online Church

Online churches are Internet-based Christian groups using a wide range of digital media to pursue a range of key religious goals. These groups conduct worship, preach, build friendships, debate issues, offer mutual support and proselytise to outsiders, using virtual worlds, chatrooms, video streaming, forums, blogs and social network sites. Online rituals have been a primary focus of scholarly research and Christian commentary since the earliest publications in this field, including considerable attention to online churches, and one key observation has been remarkably consistent: these events closely replicate offline forms. This article seeks to explore the motives and experiences underlying this adherence to the familiar, with particular attention to the replication of well-known features in visual design, liturgy and organisational structure. Previous research has emphasised the value of the familiar as a code explaining behavioural expectations to visitors, but my own research suggests a more complex range of factors, including not just framing the online setting but also demonstrating authenticity, supporting change in other areas and ‘grounding’ the experience of online worship through connection to the perceived ‘real’.

The familiarity of online religion is already apparent in the first scholarly article addressing the field, Schroeder, Heather and Lee’s examination of ‘E-Church’. The authors discuss a small congregation meeting in an early virtual world, finding that their activity reproduced many of the standard elements of charismatic worship.¹ This adherence to the familiar has been reported by numerous subsequent studies, appearing in website design² and the architecture and liturgies adopted by churches in virtual worlds.³ Theologian Douglas 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 (Estes 2009), 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.

I have studied online churches since 2007, starting with my Masters and continuing with my doctoral and post-doctoral research. This article is based on two of a series of case studies, looking at an independent

¹ See Schroeder, Heather & Lee 1998.

² See Jacobs 2007.

³ See Jenkins 2008; Robinson-Neal 2008; Miczek 2008.

virtual world church called the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life and at Church Online, a video-based ministry operated by the American multi-site church LifeChurch.tv. My doctoral thesis⁴ includes ethnographic case studies of both groups, based on several years of participant observation, face-to-face meetings with church leaders in the UK and Oklahoma and 25 interviews with members of each group. These interviews were conducted using in-world text chat for Second Life and telephone conversations for Church Online, with additional face-to-face interviews at offline meets. I use pseudonyms for all interviewees and have removed identifying information, but use the real names for both churches and their pastors: each church has already been named in mass media coverage, and neither conceals the identity of its leader, so I regard these details as public information.

2 - A Brief Introduction to Online Churches

Much Christian and secular commentary from the 1980s and 1990s downplayed the idea that online churches might be deliberately familiar, focusing rather on perceived opportunities for change. The earliest recorded online church, for example, reportedly claimed in 1985 that participants would be “pared down to pure spirit” and liberated from distraction.⁵ Joshua Cooper Ramo, author of TIME Magazine’s much-quoted cover article “Finding God on the Web”, declares poetically that “we stand at the start of a new movement in this delicate dance of technology and faith, the marriage of God and the global computer networks.”⁶ “Is it possible that God in a networked age will look, somehow, different?” Ramo foresees a utopian ideal of perfect communication: “Interconnected, we may begin to find God in places we never imagined.”⁷

These divergent speculations were shaped by the popular fascinations of the time, particularly the frontier mythology of ‘cyberspace’ and the aspirations to freedom, experimentation and the rediscovery of community associated with the frontier spirit.⁸ In fact, as we now know, new media entered the fabric of everyday life and became domesticated, individuated, inflected by the class and gender norms prevalent in wider society and highly commercialized. Online churches were no exception, and their significance as agents and arenas for religious change emerged in more subtle and complex ways than early commentators had foreseen.

Details have survived regarding a number of early online church experiments, and these reflect a blend of innovative and pre-existing elements. David Lochhead records an online service in 1986, held in response to the Challenger space shuttle disaster. The Presbyterian discussion network Presbynet organised “a memorial

⁴ See Hutchings 2010.

⁵ See Board for Social Responsibility 1999, Chapter 5.

⁶ See Ramo 1996, 6.

⁷ See Ibid, 7.

⁸ See Rheingold 1993.

liturgy with prayers, scripture, meditation and a section in which readers could add their own prayers”, followed by a time of open discussion, and “demonstrated the power of the computer medium to unite a community in a time of crisis beyond the limits of geography or denomination.”⁹ There is no suggestion here of radical departure in practice or theology, but appropriation of the distinctive affordances of new media can be discerned in the participatory aspects of the service and its diverse global audience.

For many online churches in this early period, the most important point of innovation appears to have been the assertion that common offline practices could be validly pursued online. At the First Church of Cyberspace,¹⁰ the first website church, a Presbyterian minister ran online Bible studies; ‘E-Church’, studied by Schroeder in 1998, offered virtual world prayer meetings in a charismatic house group style. Patricia Walker, pastor of Alpha Church,¹¹ offered Communion, Baptism, Confession and Absolution online, inviting the viewer to participate at home by eating, drinking or bathing in physical bread, wine and water. Both she and Gregory Neal of Grace Incarnate Ministries¹² claimed that their online communion practices conveyed the Real Presence of Christ in just the same way as a local church event.

At this stage, online churches were still relatively rare, small-scale, entrepreneurial ventures. Rev Walker’s biography on the website of Alpha Church states that she actually left the Methodist denomination to lead her online project, and my interviews with former participants suggest that the First Church attracted only a handful of congregants. This situation has now changed dramatically, particularly as a result of the surging popularity of Internet access, the rise of the participatory social media platforms known collectively as ‘Web 2.0’, and a significant shift in institutional attitudes toward online church-building. Increasing numbers of keen Christian churchgoers now use new media to pursue their interests, a range of user-friendly, free-access platforms are available for would-be pastors, and many large Christian churches and organizations have seized the opportunity to sponsor such projects in search of global attention. This institutional trend achieved considerable international publicity in 2004, when the Methodist Council¹³ and the Church of England¹⁴ both sponsored new churches online, and has intensified in recent years with the rise of the ‘online campus’ as an additional ministry platform for American megachurches.¹⁵ These new ventures continue to draw on the familiar, appropriating elements of local church design and activity and applying or combining these in somewhat unfamiliar ways.

This article focuses on two contemporary examples selected to illustrate certain key polarities in the diverse array of groups now operating online. The first example, the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life,¹⁶

⁹ See Lochhead 1997, 52.

¹⁰ See First Church of Cyberspace, <http://www.godweb.org/sanct.html/>. Retrieved 30 August 2010.

¹¹ See Alpha Church, <http://www.alphachurch.org/>. Retrieved 30 August 2010.

¹² See Grace Incarnate Ministries, <http://www.revneal.org/>. Retrieved 30 August 2010.

¹³ See Church of Fools, <http://www.churchoffools.com/>. Retrieved 30 August 2010.

¹⁴ See i-church, <http://www.i-church.org/>. Retrieved 30 August 2010.

¹⁵ See Leadership Network (2009).

¹⁶ See The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life, <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Epiphany/90/147/50>. Retrieved 30 August 2010.

has much in common with the entrepreneurial groups discussed above. Its founder was an Anglican layman, Mark Brown, who joined the virtual world of Second Life in 2006 to see what kinds of Christian missionary work were being done there. Surprised to find little activity, he contacted a lay Anglican group in-world and proposed building a new church. The resulting building combines Gothic, Romanesque and other designs into a hybrid version of European Cathedral architecture, and was opened in 2007 to host Anglican liturgical worship with sermons from Brown and other volunteer leaders. I conducted an ethnographic study of the Cathedral in 2008-09, and encountered a core community of several dozen regular participants who knew one another well, spoke daily and met often at different Second Life locations. These individuals operated avatars of almost exclusively human design, most conservatively dressed and resembling their owners at least to some degree, but a number of participants had created avatars of a different species, gender or ethnicity and these more fantastical expressions went largely unchallenged.

The second church I will focus on in this article, Church Online,¹⁷ reflects a quite different trend: well-funded, tightly-controlled and institutionally-owned. Church Online is one of a range of online ministries run by LifeChurch.tv, a multisite church based in Oklahoma City with a dozen satellite-linked ‘campuses’ across the USA.¹⁸ Each campus is led by a local pastor, but screens the same weekly sermon from senior pastor Craig Groeschel. Church Online broadcasts videos of music and sermons through its website, embedded in an ‘online campus’ offering live chatroom conversation, private one-to-one prayer chat and a range of social media tools during service events, and also streams its videos to an island in Second Life. A campus blog and Facebook page generate content through the week, under the leadership of a web pastor and his team of volunteers. The video broadcast model makes it possible for many thousands of viewers to participate at once, and a total of 1.2 million different computers connected to the 980 different Experiences held in 2009.¹⁹ Interaction between these many viewers is limited, and participants are encouraged to join small ‘LifeGroups’ for fellowship and Bible study through the week. Offline groups are also encouraged, hosting ‘Watch Parties’ in one another’s homes to view broadcasts and share a meal.

3 - Mapping Familiarity: Visual, Liturgical, Organisational

Both Church Online and the Cathedral of Second Life are recognisably familiar in a range of ways, replicating or symbolically connecting to ecclesial designs, forms and structures common to their parent tradition or sponsor church. I identify three kinds of familiarity here – visual, liturgical and organisational – and indicate some of the most significant forms of each in turn.

3.1 - Visual

¹⁷ See Church Online, <http://live.lifechurch.tv/>. Retrieved 30 August 2010.

¹⁸ See Locations and Times, <http://www.lifechurch.tv/locations/church-online>. Retrieved 30 August 2010.

¹⁹ See Brandon Donaldson (2009), private email communication.

A visitor to Epiphany Island, home to the Cathedral of Second Life, will most likely be struck by two things: the intricate care that has gone into its construction, and the resemblance of almost every element of that construction to offline Christian architecture and the natural world. There are churches in Second Life that meet high in the air, in buildings of fantastical design, embedded in clouds or gathered around waterfalls, but the Cathedral shows no interest in such unconventional settings.

This virtual cathedral is built in grey stone and planned in a traditional style, cruciform with a long nave crossed 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. 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 include 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.

Figure 1: The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life



Figure 2: Cathedral Interior



Not all participants were enthusiastic. Quentin, an Australian, complained that the chosen design “is very English or European. It does not cater for Asians Africans or South Americans for instance.” According to Paula, an English woman who described herself as dechurched, the architecture signalled a High Church affiliation that she could not share. These objections were rare, however, and most praised the design very highly; even Paula admitted that “aesthetically, it is fantastic”.

Outside the highly-carved main doorway, a broad plaza offers space to gather. To one side, benches surround a fireplace, near a flagpole bearing the Anglican Compass Rose; to the other, an array of noticeboards leads to one of several quiet gardens. A Tudor-themed parish house stands alongside the Cathedral, with a pillared two-storey conference hall behind it. 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 the grounds. If the visitor's speakers are turned on, gentle sounds of birdsong can be heard.

Figure 3: Epiphany Island



Church Online operates through a website, offering fewer opportunities for recreating the visual experience of a local church. Instead of photographs of the church building and the family of the pastor, the website focuses on branding, displaying the church logo and colour scheme, catchy slogans and quick links to take different categories of visitor – newcomers, regular members, other church pastors – to the site areas they need. There are no Christian symbols on display. This visual style reflects a deliberate strategy, discussed

below in section 4.1, in which Christian imagery is downplayed to minimise any suggestion that the non-Christian visitor is encountering an alien subculture.

LifeChurch.tv has also created a Second Life island, however, and this is designed as an exact replica of a physical site in Oklahoma. Many elements of this design have no in-world purpose: the campus includes offices, an auditorium with seating for hundreds, and corridors designed for non-existent children's ministries, decorated with the same cartoon wallpaper selected for the physical campus. According to Brandon Donaldson, the Church Online web pastor, this design "*is the Stillwater Oklahoma Campus*": "we wanted to be a campus", a place people would visit to attend Experiences, but also to offer "a great way for people to take a look at a campus" and "really experience" what visiting LifeChurch.tv is like. This strategy has not proven popular with all visitors – "it's like a cinema", Paula told me, "how boring!"

Figure 4: LifeChurch.tv, Epiphany Island



3.2 - Liturgical

Researchers interested in online religion have often observed the use of familiar elements of liturgy and ritual as well as visual design. Nadja Miczek, for example, concludes from her study of three virtual world churches that "on the level of content [all three are] trying to copy offline services as good as possible into the virtual world", with few examples of ritual innovation.²⁰ This observation is largely true of the Cathedral and Church Online, where services are extremely similar in content and design to those one might encounter at a local church of the same tradition.

²⁰ See Miczek 2008, 167.

Church Online reproduces the one-hour service structure designed for local LifeChurch.tv campuses, combining videos of worship bands, the main sermon and the campus pastor's comments. Donaldson explains this careful reproduction of the familiar as a theological decision, a response to the perception that God was at work online through LifeChurch.tv: "The Internet Campus gives us the opportunity to be part of what God is doing [...] we don't want to do anything outside what you're already doing, God."

In keeping with the architectural style of the Cathedral, Mark Brown adopted a traditional Anglican style of liturgy based on the service of Evening Prayer, adding modifications to this structure 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.

Other Cathedral worship leaders also explained their service designs to me as a blend of familiarity and innovation, showing little interest in creating liturgical forms unique to Second Life. Andrew, for example, a Methodist preacher offline, 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 these reassuringly recognisable worship styles were welcomed by most of 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.'"

Not all visitors agreed, and those who did not appreciate particular liturgical styles offline generally seemed disappointed to find them perpetuated online. Rachel, an "eclectic witch" from Scotland, greatly enjoyed visiting the Cathedral – a point we return to below – but refused to attend services there:

they annoy me on a personal level..... not the people(well some of them do probably)
i don't think that me taking an "active" part would benefit either me or the
congregation....
i know what a service is.... they don't want my opinion..

Rachel actually preferred attending physical church services, where she could walk out and wander in the graveyard if she needed to distance herself from proceedings. In Second Life, she could teleport quickly

away from any religious space – but claimed she “would get nothing out of it”, because clicking the teleport button was too “instant” to be meaningful.

Miczek reports some form of “transformation of ritual gestures” in one early virtual world church, Church of Fools,²¹ and Church of Fools participants I encountered during my own research reported using their avatars in a range of innovative ways to support worship and social interaction. Second Life theoretically offers much more flexibility in avatar animation, but those animations are actually less accessible – generally coded into ‘pose balls’ built into the environment – and heighten problems of lag. Both Church Online and the Cathedral do offer animations, through a Head-Up Display and pose-balls respectively, but these offer only those options – raising hands, bowing heads, kneeling – acceptable in a local church of the same tradition. I encountered no examples of liturgical innovation involving avatars at either church – aside, perhaps, from the occasional outbreaks of dancing Mark Brown and others sometimes indulged in to entertain the congregation after services. Even where some choice was offered, participants generally preferred the range of actions they would use offline. According to Ashley, a High Anglican at the Cathedral, “I’ve never been one for the handswaying in rl so I don’t do that here” – “I guess it’s all what is most like rl [‘real life’].”

The Church Online website also uses avatars in a limited and familiar way, despite its reliance on video streaming and text chat. Prayers are offered for approval, including a final call to commit to Christ, and viewers respond by clicking on a small animated figure. A click raises the silhouette’s hand, the physical gesture used in local campuses to signal a ‘decision for Christ’.

Figure 5: A “hand raised” at Church Online



Gestures may be relatively rare in communal worship, but some of my interviewees found them valuable in private prayer. Olive, for example, enjoyed navigating the Cathedral’s labyrinth: “the concentration was good I think [...] it helped me to think, to be still, even though my avatar wasn’t!” Mandy also spoke of the benefits of an avatar for her concentration and focus: “I often come to SL to do my RL prayers [...] it just helps me be reminded that I need to stop and pray”. June did not pray with others offline, but had begun to

²¹ See Miczek 2008, 157.

do so in Second Life. She found her avatar helped communicate and frame the event: “When I'm praying with someone, the kneeling stops the conversation and starts the praying.”

Embodied participation is not restricted to the symbolism of avatar gestures. Many of the online participants I spoke to used their physical bodies in online worship, particularly by singing along to worship music. Anthony, a young man from Wales, visited Church Online several times every week – once to concentrate on the week's sermon, once to talk to other visitors – and also attended a local Pentecostal church. “I tend to sing a lot”, he confessed, waking up his parents, and would stand up and dance if he had sufficient space around his computer desk. I encountered similar stories at a number of online churches, particularly the nondenominational forum, chatroom and blog website St Pixels, where participants regularly reported singing along to the traditional church hymns played during worship.

Anthony's story shows some of the restrictions that offline location and social context can impose on online activity, but other interviewees tried to integrate their online and offline worlds by inviting friends and family to join them. I met several married couples and offline friends using Second Life together, but such integration was much more common at Church Online. LifeChurch.tv encourages couples to volunteer together to co-host small fellowship groups and greet newcomers to Experiences, and has shown particular enthusiasm for local ‘Watch Party’ events. The 2010 evangelistic sermon series ‘At the Movies’ was accompanied by a series of text and video recipes and dinner party instructions.²²

3.3 - Organisational

The organisational structure of a religious group – who is in charge, which areas of group life they oversee, the specific forms of power and influence they wield and how they are authorised to do so – is of key significance in underpinning theological validity. Training, ordination, divine calling or personal qualities may all be important, in different combinations, and the specific blend of factors required in a particular tradition must be demonstrated by the leader and perceived as such by their followers. Church organisation is also important on a social level, structuring opportunities for action, expression and advancement so as to encourage valued forms of behaviour, relationship and experience and protect participants from undesirable variants – although, of course, leaders and participants may differ somewhat in their ideas of value. These theological and social dimensions may operate in positive or negative terms, through upholding a particular structure like ordained ministry or rejecting unacceptable alternatives.

The online churches I have studied, including the Cathedral and Church Online, all take care to follow theologically and socially acceptable patterns of organisation. Deviation from these patterns is a common source of conflict. This may be understood as a function of the stability of online church theology, which

²² See Dinner and a Movie, <http://internet.lifechurch.tv/dinner-and-a-movie/>. Retrieved 30 August 2010.

predominantly perpetuates familiar ideologies. Schroeder, Heather and Lee note in their early study of ‘E-Church’ that women were able to lead prayer services, and use this observation to demonstrate the importance of understanding the offline context of specific genres of practice: female leadership “would quite naturally suggest (at least to a sizeable number of participants who are charismatic ‘insiders’) the ethos of a home or other small group meeting”.²³

In this example, offline context legitimates a potentially controversial online figure. A similar move was made in certain interviews at the Cathedral of Second Life, where several participants familiar with Anglican churchmanship justified Mark Brown’s status as a lay church leader by comparing his role to that of a Pioneer Minister, a recognised position in the Church of England that can be occupied by a lay individual. In other cases, however, the reproduction of familiar organisational structures can serve to legitimate the whole church. For some interviewees, their online group was a ‘true church’ precisely because it had a validly-authorised pastor, constitution or legal status. The later development of the Cathedral indicates the importance of this kind of thinking: Mark Brown persuaded his local bishop to ordain him as a priest, and used contacts within the online congregation to organise a series of meetings in the UK with representatives of a Church of England diocese. These meetings were largely inconclusive, but did lead to the creation of a written constitution based on Anglican church law.²⁴

The organisational structure of Church Online has developed in quite the opposite direction, toward more flexible reinterpretation of offline structures. LifeChurch.tv operates a multi-site model with a strong centralising tendency, ensuring that all campuses use the same schedules, programs and resources and insisting on identical designs and furnishings with heavy display of the LifeChurch brand. The first online church created by LifeChurch.tv was called ‘The Internet Campus’, and followed this campus model very closely. The service event followed the same format, with the same elements, and was overseen by a Campus Pastor. Visitors could talk to one another in a chatroom area, ‘The Lobby’, which was available only for a few minutes before and then a few minutes after each event, replicating the experience of chatting to friends in the lobby of a local campus before and after a service. A subsequent re-launch added another, equally literal recreation of local practice: visitors could add the email addresses of their contacts and chat to those specific individuals during the service, an option called ‘Friends in Your Row’.

Over time, LifeChurch.tv has moved away from copying its successful offline model in favour of more context-driven engagement with the distinctive affordances 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 explained to me, and needed to find new models to achieve that aim. The location of the online ministry within the LifeChurch.tv staffing structure was moved, aligning it more closely with the IT department in an attempt to increase flexibility. Changes were also made to the online

²³ See Schroeder, Heather & Lee 1998.

²⁴ See Milena 2010.

environment: Church Online features a much more active blog, continual proliferation of Experience times, new video segments addressing the online viewer and appropriation of a whole range of online tools and social networks. An open chatroom, no registration necessary, was added directly alongside the Experience broadcast window.

My conversations with online churchgoers included a range of criticisms of inadequate, untheological or even dangerous organisational forms, highlighting some of the complexity of this issue. One former Cathedral member, an Anglican woman from England, retold an experience that had shocked her, showing the importance she attributed to the continuation of traditional forms of authorisation:

- : lol I just had an interesting experience in a church hehe
- : I went to a cathedral, lovely building, great music, all the trimmings of a beautiful Catholic church
- : this guy comes in, changes into a priest's garb
- : and announces he is ready to take confession
- : looked at his profile and – well – I dont think he was a priest by a LONG way
- : I am very uncomfortable with people RPing [role-playing] as priests
- : there seem to be many – if I build a church, I get to be its priest....
- : but I'm catholic enough to not be comfortable with that

According to this Anglican woman, “when we were building this place [the Cathedral], it was my only point of contact with ANY church”, and was “very important to me”, but this close contact was made possible only by the conformity of the church to pre-existing ideas of validity.

Paula, already quoted several times above, reflects a quite different approach to online organisation. Paula attended many churches in Second Life, including the Cathedral and the Church Online island, but claims that each group had a “controlling force” that pushed her away as soon as she tried to participate in leadership. She has described very similar experiences offline, and it was this kind of rejection that initially led her to abandon local churchgoing in search of new opportunities online. In fact, she told me, “the SL churches are replicating RL with all the pettiness, egos and control freaks.” For Paula, online church should be a chance to redesign religious community, increase participation and – on a personal level – find recognition for her gifts. I make no attempt to determine the validity of her complaints, but repeat them here to draw attention to her strong conviction that institutional organisation structures should not be perpetuated online – quite the reverse of the attitudes discussed above. Once again, the use of familiarity as a strategy appears to limit the appeal of an online church to those who already accept the authority of the familiar.

4 - The Purposes of Familiarity

As demonstrated at the start of this article, scholars discussing the familiar elements of online religion have tended to emphasise their pragmatic value as clear guides to the activity, behaviour and mood expected of participants. According to Schroeder, for example, the opening words of an E-Church prayer service – “[First name of one of the participants], show us your life” – evoke “a well-established and, for charismatics, totally familiar ‘frame’ inviting participants to infer the kind of language and practices expected in the meeting.”²⁵ Jacobs expresses the same point through attention to ritual and sacred space as semiotic systems, arguing that “meaning has to be encoded in a way that is recognisable to the interpretative community for whom it is intended”.²⁶

My observations and interviews indicate that these claims are correct, but only reflect one of a wider range of motives. I identify four such themes here, all drawn from conversations with church leaders and participants: framing, demonstrating authenticity, encouraging change in other areas and ‘grounding’ the online experience.

4.1 - Framing

The first of these themes reflects the general trend of scholarship noted above, and was one important point raised by the church leaders, volunteers and participants I interviewed. Mark Brown explained his design decisions – the choice to build a large structure, with impressive traditional architecture, designated as an Anglican Cathedral rather than a church – partly in these terms. The church design should be “very clearly Christian, an icon, a symbol of Christianity”, so that anyone who visited it would immediately recognise what it was and know what to expect. Congregants receive electronic “service sheets” setting out the words, responses and actions they will hear, but even without this assistance the architecture of the space signals a particular kind of religious practice and identity. Brown clearly sees this as a positive, attractive feature, but – as Paula and Rachel observed in the interviews quoted above – distinctive architecture can also signal exclusion.

According to Brown the decision to build a Cathedral also attracted publicity from mainstream secular media, attracted to the idea of traditional churches doing novel and unexpected things:

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

²⁵ See Schroeder 1998.

²⁶ See Jacobs 2007.

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.

Visitors to the Cathedral often arrived after searching specifically for Anglican spaces in Second Life, demonstrating the importance of the clear framing of the space. June is a good example:

Interviewer: so what made you look for anglican sims?

June : because I'm an Episcopalian

: and I did wonder if there would be a chance to chat with people from elsewhere

This use of architecture to signal identity, tradition and expectations of behaviour contrasts strongly with the approach of LifeChurch.tv. LifeChurch reflects the 'New Paradigm'²⁷ and 'Appropriator'²⁸ models of American Protestant churchmanship, characterised by the appropriation of elements of style and organization from secular culture. New Paradigm churches adapt their environments and practices to abandon whatever might be alienating in their dress, words, music, worship or lifestyles and emphasize the personal, life-changing challenge of their religious message. The architecture of these churches resembles a cinema or shopping mall, displays of Christian symbols are kept to a minimum, pastors and congregation wear relaxed clothing, and – at least at LifeChurch.tv – even the long walk across the extensive car park is eased by volunteers in golf carts who ferry newcomers to the door.

This environment still foregrounds familiarity, but does so in different ways. First, every aspect of LifeChurch design is designed to seem comfortable, clean, warm and inviting to the first-time visitor, minimising any indication that they are entering an isolated alien subculture. Second, every LifeChurch campus is identical, operating a system closely akin to a business franchise or chain; resources are designed centrally and distributed to all other sites, maximising efficiency, facilitating greater investment in high-quality production, and helping participants move easily from church to church as required without missing any instalments in the teaching series.

These observations apply equally to Church Online. As noted above, there are no clear Christian symbols on display – no cross or dove – and no traditional church designs, and the videos streamed through the website emphasise direct personal communication from young pastors dressed in fashionable but informal attire. A range of other features serve to frame the environment as personal and successful, including texts

²⁷ See Miller 1997.

²⁸ See Miller & Flory 2008.

directly addressing the viewer – “Are you hurting? Do you need to pray with someone?” and a map of the world showing all the locations currently connected, reminding the viewer of the global success of the ministry they are watching. A large banner asks, “Want to tell someone about Church Online?”, linking to a range of tools that will post pre-scripted invitations to the user’s favourite social network site – framing the space as evangelistic and encouraging integration into pre-existing friendship networks.

4.2 - Demonstrating Authenticity

Familiarity achieves more than simply signalling identity and expectation. As noted above in my discussion of organisational familiarity, leaders at both churches explained their structural decisions as guarantees of the validity of their ministry, participating in the work of God and – in the case of the Cathedral - connecting their activity to a wider Church able to provide stability and oversight. Visual and liturgical familiarity can also function in this way, demonstrating the authenticity of the church to visitors who understand the appropriate codes of meaning.

For some participants, authentic structure was crucial. I have also conducted research at i-church, an Anglican online church set up by the Diocese of Oxford, and found that several of my interviewees had joined that group specifically because it was connected to a diocese. Esme, for example, explained that “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”, a necessary condition for her participation. These views were much less common at the Cathedral, as one might expect, where no such official link existed at the time of its launch, and are quite foreign to the evangelical theology of LifeChurch.tv.

Participants at both the Cathedral and Church Online also valued familiarity as a symbol of authenticity, however, creating an environment that helped them see the church as ‘real’, true or valid. Ed explained that he valued the look of the Cathedral and the Anglican style of worship because it made the event seem more “real”: “for a service I like the feeling that I am ‘in’ a church”. Visual representation was important because it enabled Ed to see that other people were present, using digital technology to recreate an important aspect of local attendance that online media might otherwise obscure. For Sam, reading Morning Prayer over his breakfast each day while logged into the Cathedral helped generate a sense of being “connected to everyone else who is reading it as well as opposed to just reading out of a book”. LifeChurch.tv’s Second Life users also reported the importance of seeing legitimacy and perceiving connectedness. According to Florence “we could meet anywhere and accomplish the same thing”, but the professionally-constructed site “does make the church look more ‘legit’”. Florence much preferred the virtual world campus to the Church Online website, because of the visible presence of the avatar bodies of other viewers: “it felt more like ‘real church’ to me, I think it feels more like a community.”

For some interviewees, the traditional architecture of the Cathedral demonstrated authentic spiritual power quite apart from any Christian framing. Rachel, the “eclectic witch”, visited the Cathedral every day at the time of our interviews. She liked to visit local religious sites wherever she went, perceiving an ‘energy’ there which “has been part of the earth since time began”, and – despite this apparently physical explanation – found the same energy online at the Cathedral and surrounding island. “its a spiritual energy”, she mused, “which can possibly be transferred thru the web” – “or possibly the place just ‘focuses’ your mind into a collective consciousness type of thing?”

4.3 - Supporting Change

Rachel’s comments address her perception of authenticity, but other conversations with Cathedral leaders applied this perceived appeal to the task of evangelism. Traditionalism here appears as a tool not for framing or reassurance but for attracting people into a space where they can be transformed by the message of the group. Mark Brown, for example, argued that a traditional design was ideally suited to contemporary spirituality:

[Another] 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.

Andrew, another Cathedral leader, expressed a similar idea:

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.

The 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. The church leaders perceive this not only as legitimating the church but as evangelism,

reaching out to new audiences who never attend local churches – the same goal that LifeChurch pursues through its contrasting philosophy of familiar, comfortable, neutral spaces.

Reliance on the familiar also supports other kinds of change. The innovative creations of LifeChurch.tv, filled with drama sketches and on-location shoots and promoted through branding, graphic design, banner adverts, teaser videos and online tie-ins, require intense preparation by a large full-time staff and effectively rule out lay participation. Volunteers are welcome to use these materials to lead their own small groups and venture out on their own mission trips, but the production standards and creative demands of the main content ensure that control remains tightly centralised. Simple text and spoken-word services, on the other hand, can be constructed from existing materials to a well-known formula. The use of familiar liturgical patterns may seem much less innovative, but actually supports the inclusion of wider pools of untrained lay people in the production and performance of ritual. The Cathedral is a partial example of this, and a handful of regular congregants have been able to take roles leading worship and Bible study. Other online churches have taken this inclusive approach much further: the non-denominational group St Pixels now includes more than 35 different people leading worship.²⁹

4.4 - Grounding Online Experience

The final motive for familiarity that I list here is one of the more complex. Mark Brown explained in our interview that the use of familiar visual elements was actually necessary, as a counter-balance to tendencies within the online environment that would otherwise undermine the use of digital media in worship:

[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.

The idea that online media convey moods or expectations that are hostile to spiritual experience has been echoed in a number of academic studies. Several 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, and this is perceived to be 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

²⁹ See Our Leadership and Hosting Teams, <http://www.stpixels.com/article?article=ce9ed8d3-acb6-4309-a715-1fe4941463b4>. Retrieved 30 August 2010.

quality as constructed, as arbitrary, and as artificial, a game played with no material stakes or consequences”.³⁰ Lorne Dawson argues, similarly, that the medium of the Internet “seems to significantly heighten the reflexivity of participants in rituals, and this reflexivity can appear inimical to authentic religious practice”.³¹

These comments assume a connection between experience of the sacred and loss of self-awareness, losing oneself in the flow of time and so becoming open to experiencing something beyond and greater than the self. The point here is not, of course, that everyday social worlds and church architecture are not synthetic or offer some kind of unmediated immediacy. 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, might seem incapable of this degree of unconsciousness, and this limitation could undermine its potential as a venue for the sacred.

Mark Brown’s comments about grounding suggest that the use of familiar elements in online worship should be seen as one response to this potential difficulty. Worshipping online, communicating with God, in the company of people scattered across the world, while remaining alone in front of a computer screen, is indeed a strange and novel concept. 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.

Church Online highlights several further responses to this challenge of artificiality. Different theological traditions value different religious emotions and perceptions; the idea of ‘sacred space’ is much more important to some groups than others. Evangelical theology emphasises the Word, to be read, preached and believed, and has commonly engaged with print, radio and television ministry as means to share that message. The attitude of LifeChurch.tv to architecture and community must be understood in this context, as aids to the core purpose of personal engagement with a message, and awareness of artificiality is a less serious challenge than it might be to a more sacramental High Anglican congregation. Video streaming is well suited to generating a sense of immediacy and personal connection, as many of my interviewees reported. Indeed, for some the power of video teaching was such that they felt an even stronger connection with their preacher than they would sitting in his congregation. Pastor Craig switches his attention effortlessly between audience and camera, fixing the viewer with his gaze to underscore key points without

³⁰ See O’Leary 2004, 56.

³¹ See Dawson 2005, 16.

ever holding that gaze too long, and these close-ups generate a sense of direct address that would be easier to evade in a crowd. Similarly powerful experiences were reported through video streaming of worship: for Anthony “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.”

According to one of LifeChurch.tv’s senior staff, this sense of connection is identified as a key goal for video ministry and reinforced through careful use of camera angles:

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.

A second supposed objection to the success of online ritual also connects to the use of the familiar. Several researchers have argued that the prevailing moods of online communication, particularly flippancy and irony, are opposed to the generation of a sense of sacredness. According to Randolph Kluver and Yanli Chen, for example, the visual style of Church of Fools suggested games and cartoons and encouraged a distinctly light-hearted, disorderly atmosphere: “sacred space is constantly undermined by a general sense of levity... despite the pains taken to create a credible ‘mediated presence’ of being there”. This “curious melange of levity and gravitas” encouraged “an individually-oriented, postmodern and anti-institutional spirituality”, “questioning and searching for the sacred in the midst of the profane”, but the Church “was too much fun to evoke a sense of spirituality for some users”.³²

I met several of these critics during my own research. One Church Online regular, who led his own LifeGroup in Second Life, expressed distress when I informed him that I was also studying Church of Fools:

- : why would you join something with such a condescending name? [...]
- : I think Christians are far from foolish [...]
- : it sounds to me that they are not Christian
- : and you were not either
- : to join this sort of place

These objections do not amount to a demonstration of some essential opposition between levity and sacredness, however, and a wide range of spiritualities can combine these themes successfully. Both the Cathedral and Church Online value humour, in architectural decisions – armchairs topped the Cathedral tower at one point, and a shiny sports car perches precariously on the roof of the Second Life campus – and in the content of preaching and conversation. Church Online regularly shows brief drama sketches reflecting

³² See Kluver & Chen 2008.

an absurdist sense of humour, and Pastor Craig's sermons include frequent anecdotes intended to entertain his audience. Neither the Cathedral nor LifeChurch.tv officially encourages "individually-oriented" spirituality, however, and Groeschel in particular regularly attacks that concept in his sermons.

I prefer to understand levity and familiarity as co-dependent strategies, working together to create a flexible response to the challenges of generating spiritual experience through new media. By evoking familiar and time-honoured forms, like Gothic architecture, kneeling to pray or raising hands in response to the evangelist's call, users can connect with the symbolism of those acts and participate in their perceived 'authenticity'. This strategy is incomplete, however, because the digital copy is manifestly not identical to the original. This offers both opportunity and challenge: the distance between online and physical creates distance, which may be perceived as safety by those hostile to institutional religion but also as absurdity. There is a degree of strangeness in commanding a cartoon character to kneel, and the participants I spoke to were generally aware that non-participants considered their behaviour curious. Perceived differences between the physical and the digital can be exploited and disarmed through humour, which can be used to intensify distance through pastiche and parody or to recognise that distance and legitimise it. Participants use levity and humour to incorporate these challenges into their activity, affirm to one another that they have recognised them, and thereby defuse their threat. Humour operates both to create distance and to reassure and unite those who share the joke, and each achievement may support the generation of spiritual or sacred experience.

These combinations of familiarity and levity operate in opposition to a specific set of challenges, but these are neither static nor universally felt. Both group theology and media experience can influence the need to legitimate online activity through humour. Many Church of Fools visitors needed to create space from the institutional imagery represented through the architecture around them, and used the humour of the space to do so, but neither the Cathedral nor Church Online shares this cultural focus. In Church Online in particular any criticisms of church policy or teaching are sternly received by leaders and congregation. Humour is used to make the church more attractive, particularly in centrally-created content, but jokes tend to be rare and rather unwelcome in chatroom conversation. There is also a cultural and technological dimension to this theme, particularly if we understand familiarity and levity as a response to the strangeness of online worship: as online media become ever more familiar, this perception fades. Many of the Church Online regulars I spoke to used many blogs, podcasts and other online resources to access high-quality sermons and music, and saw nothing peculiar in going to church online; for these individuals, perhaps, familiarity serves no purpose beyond the continued pursuit of their personal interests.

5 - Conclusion

This article has examined two very different online churches – the independent virtual world Cathedral of Second Life, with its Gothic architecture and tentative links to the Anglican Communion, and the video-focused, megachurch-owned project Church Online. These groups pursue quite different theologies, different activities, different visual styles and different models of participation in leadership. Each replicates many aspects of its local counterparts, however, and the hands-raised animation of Church Online is just as familiar to American evangelical participants as the wooden pews of the Cathedral are to Anglicans.

These familiar elements serve a range of purposes. The online environment is clearly framed for participants, who can – if they understand the relevant ecclesial tradition – immediately appreciate what they should expect and how they should respond. Participants are assured of the theological validity of the online ministry, because of literal and/or symbolic its participation in the structures and styles of ‘real’ churches offline. Familiarity offers a platform for change, as a strategy for attracting outsiders and a pre-set pattern for untrained leaders to follow. Finally, familiar elements ‘ground’ online experience and counter-act potentially disorienting effects of online media, often working with levity to do so.

This article has also sought to highlight some of the limitations of this strategy, particularly its failure to connect with those individuals who dislike the styles and structures of offline churches. Both the Cathedral and Church Online are heavily populated by churchgoers who enjoy the styles of their local churches and have no desire to change them, and this cultural trend – highly attractive to many Christians interested in expanding their religious activity through new media – may seriously undermine the potential of online churches to reach beyond this core constituency to appeal to new audiences. Should future ministries wish to achieve this elusive goal, it may prove necessary to find ways to deter local churchgoers from shaping group culture toward the perpetuation of the styles and structures that have failed to appeal to those new audiences offline.

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