



# Virtual Church

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To behold, use or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological form is necessarily to embrace it. To listen to radio or to read the printed page is to accept these extensions of ourselves into our personal system and to undergo the “closure” or displacement of perception that follows automatically.

—Marshall McLuhan<sup>1</sup>

**A**s preparation for this essay, I conducted a completely nonscientific survey of a 3,300 member Facebook group called ELCA Clergy.<sup>2</sup> The survey post read, “Writing an essay for *Word & World* on ‘Virtual Church’ and would like to know which of the following approaches would most interest you and be of most help to you in your setting.” By a considerable margin, those who clicked on an option voted for “a theological analysis of virtual church ministry” (17 votes). Other options included a “virtual church road trip” (7 votes), “a survey of main topics in virtual church” (10 votes), or a “specific in-depth examination of one virtual church context” (4 votes). I will return to an analysis of the *why* of these survey results in a moment, but at the beginning of this essay, I want to ask a different metaquestion.

When these pastors were at their computers, reading and commenting and voting in the ELCA Clergy Facebook group, were they participating in *virtual* church or *real* church? Was this real ecclesial networking or virtual ecclesial net-

<sup>1</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Berkeley, CA: Ginkgo Press, 2003) 68.

<sup>2</sup>Available at <http://www.facebook.com/groups/elcacergy/>

*The distinction between the “virtual” and the “real” may be more fluid than we think. The way to learn to do ministry in the virtual world is actually to go there and walk around.*

working? Is this a form of churchwide ministry, synodical ministry, or “only” a virtual ministry ancillary to other expressions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America? How would we decide?

Consider another example. Yesterday evening, I went to an Episcopal outdoor prayer chapel to pray Compline. Nine people gathered, and we prayed the service and lections out of the *Book of Common Prayer*. A worship leader led the prayer office, and members of the community volunteered to read lessons and chant. Afterwards, we sat around and talked for a while, especially spending time asking each other about the specific prayer requests each of us had lifted during the prayers. Then we went home.

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*How important is it that all of this took place via avatars in Second Life? Does it modify the extent to which you consider it to have been an authentic worship experience?*

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In the preceding paragraph, how important is it that all of this took place via avatars in Second Life,<sup>3</sup> on the prayer labyrinth at St. Matthew’s by the Sea?<sup>4</sup> Does it modify the extent to which you consider it to have been an authentic worship experience and, if so, what are the theological or social presuppositions that lead you to that conclusion? Conversely, if I had described such a setting as taking place at an Episcopal congregation that I was visiting while on vacation (or, to take the earlier example, if I had surveyed clergy—perhaps using a paper survey—while attending a synod assembly), would your assumptions concerning the authenticity and reality of those encounters be different?

I describe these two settings and ask these questions because in my opinion we have not yet clearly thought about the differences between the virtual and the real and have largely been blind to the effects of new media transitions as they are occurring. As a result, our theology of ministry in what we tend to label “virtual” contexts is seriously impoverished and our awareness of the effects of transitions to new media consistently leaves the church lagging behind the culture as new media emerge. To the extent that this is a result of our inattention (or even intentional disregard), we should be ashamed of ourselves.<sup>5</sup> To the extent that this results from the legitimate difficulty of staying ahead of the curve on new media and philosophies of the real, we are called simply to be more intentionally attentive: “The church must start now—immediately—if it wants to be a significant part of the virtual world of the future. In the United States, the church has been playing catch-up in areas such as music and film for most of the second half of the twentieth-

<sup>3</sup>See <http://secondlife.com/>

<sup>4</sup>At <http://stmattainsl.wordpress.com/> (accessed May 11, 2012).

<sup>5</sup>I am consistently surprised, for example, by the number of clergy I encounter who have an opinion about ministry and worship on Second Life, but who have not actually tried it out.

eth century because it foolishly wasted God-given opportunities to engage those media in the first half of the twentieth century.”<sup>6</sup>

As we address this challenge, it is wise to remember that “the Web itself is not very old, and it didn’t become a mass phenomenon until relatively recently.... Under the circumstances, it would be a great surprise if we yet knew what the digital sensorium turns out to be like, or what effects it might have on us. Results of studies right now might, for instance, be picking up only (or ‘mostly’) the effect of *switching* from a mostly-physical ecology to a largely-digital ecology. We don’t have a lot of perspective on the changes in which we’re participating.”<sup>7</sup> However, given the ever-increasing importance and impact of the “digital sensorium,” we are responsible for gaining as much perspective as we can.

### REAL CHURCH ISN’T

Our first task is to come to our labeling of the “virtual” context with some humility. By “virtual church” we typically mean any kind of church that takes place in digital contexts. However, A. K. M. Adam’s subtle labeling of ecologies as either “mostly-physical” or “largely-digital” is helpful. The standard terminology perhaps sets up an unnecessary distinction between two contexts that are less distinct in reality. The fundamental philosophical question is whether or not any aspect of life is actually “unmediated.” Contemporary media studies would remind us that, if nothing else, all of life is mediated, and much more is media than we are often aware of.<sup>8</sup>

Take, for example, any person’s physical presence in a physical community. Although we tend to live as if we are really present in these contexts, our entire presence is mediated. We are mediated through our language, through the persona (the avatar or mask) that we put on for various contexts. In the contemporary social media context, we are further mediated by the ambient intimacy of social networks that update us on the life and thought of those we will sometimes, if not always, see in physical contexts. To varying degrees, we are different people in the workplace, at home, on Facebook, in LinkedIn, or at church. All the digital sensorium does is remind us once again that we are mediated in this way. As Danah Boyd notes in her essay on American teen sociality in networked public spaces, today’s teens are “the first generation to have to publicly articulate itself, to have to write itself into being as a precondition of social participation.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, this generation is not so much *different* as it is simply the *first*, and so more notable.

Contemporary neuroscience research also increasingly recognizes that “the

<sup>6</sup>Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 223.

<sup>7</sup>A. K. M. Adam, private correspondence, May 19, 2011.

<sup>8</sup>Hence the Marshall McLuhan quote that heads this essay, which recognizes that media are extension of humanity, which, the longer we use them, the more they are displaced in our perception of them.

<sup>9</sup>Danah Michele Boyd, “Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics” (PhD thesis, University of California–Berkeley, 2008) 120; at <http://www.danah.org/papers/TakenOutOfContext.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2012).

brain doesn't much care if an experience is real or virtual."<sup>10</sup> There are phenomenological and psychological modalities at play here that go beyond the purview of this essay, but the basic idea is worth noting:

The distinction between real and virtual is relative. Humans contrast what is usually considered "grounded reality"—what they believe to be the "natural" or "physical" world—with all other "virtual realities" they experience, such as dreams, literature, cartoons, movies, and online environments such as Facebook or *Second Life*. This contrast allows us to avoid being mired in the unending debate over what constitutes reality.<sup>11</sup>

At this point, you may be asking how precisely this conversation is theological rather than ethnographical or if it is merely an exercise in media studies with a quasi-religious-studies component. Conducting our review of "virtual church" in this way, however, should send our reflections back to the many places in Scripture where mediated presence and differentiations between the real and the virtual come into play.

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Some of the most obvious of these include: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20); or Jesus takes bread and says, "This is my body that is for you" (1 Cor 11:24); or in Ephesians, with the cosmological assertion, "And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph 1:22–23). In the first instance, the individual speaker, Paul, is now the mediating presence of Christ in the world. Which is virtual and which is real? It would not be too much of a stretch to argue that in this case, the virtual is more real than the real (whatever that might mean). In the second case, the church has had a long-standing and faithful conversation on precisely how to articulate the presence of Christ in that bread because it is not exactly clear how simple bread can be the media through which the message, Christ, can both be expressed and itself be the messenger of the message through the media. Finally, in the third case, the church becomes the mediating presence of Christ in the world, so that a community stands in for the one, but precisely because the one is already community. All of this illustrates not so much a theology of virtual church, but rather how a conversation around virtual church sends us back to our source texts and theological presuppositions and highlights them in new ways.

Or take as a final example the most wonderful exercise in media studies in all

<sup>10</sup>Jim Blascovich and Jeremy Bailenson, *Infinite Reality: Avatars, Eternal Life, New Worlds, and the Dawn of the Virtual Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011) 3.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 15–16.

of Scripture: “We don’t need letters of introduction to you or from you like other people, do we? You are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are Christ’s letter, delivered by us. You weren’t written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. You weren’t written on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor 3:1–3 CEB). Paul’s riff on letters, tablets, and believers as living letters of Christ illustrates the marriage of media and message in precisely the theological format we need to consider. In this early part of 2 Corinthians, he uses the metaphor as a rhetorical flourish to win over his readers. Later, however, he mentions his own literal letter and makes this argument, “I don’t want it to seem like I’m trying to intimidate you with my letters. I know what some people are saying: ‘His letters are severe and powerful, but in person he is weak and his speech is worth nothing.’ These people need to think about this—that when we are with you, our actions will show that we are the same as the words we wrote when we were away from you” (2 Cor. 10:9–11 CEB). Paul argues that his letters themselves are extensions of himself and representative of him, so the distinction between the media he sends and himself as the messenger authoring the message is a relative one—and he makes this argument in the context of a letter, while he himself is physically absent. This last point is especially important, if often overlooked.

Paul’s example should guide us to consider something about his ministry worth emulating, namely, that a letter or other media we make use of to extend ourselves is not a vehicle through which “real” ministry is accomplished but is *itself* the ministry. Churches that “get” this use digital media *as* ministry, rather than as tools to communicate *about* ministry. Perhaps this is an easier concept to embrace when speaking of social media, but still worth noting, since in the transition to new media, it is often the tendency to focus on the medium itself rather than to embrace the medium as an extension of the message and messenger. New technologies are always self-referential until they no longer are.

## VIRTUAL MISSIOLOGY

Truly immersive new media, such as virtual worlds or MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) take this discussion to another level. They are, at their best, another world separate and distinct in some ways from the “real world.” In fact, in virtual environments, users often refer to “RL” (Real Life) or “IRL” (In Real Life) to distinguish between real life and their virtual life. This kind of language illustrates how immersive the virtual world can be, inasmuch as language then develops to point back to the world outside the virtual environment.

In these contexts, the church needs to bring the same kinds of critical tools one brings to mission in order to understand the context adequately. As Mark Brown explains, “The virtual world is a new mission field. We are called by God to pitch our tent in this strange land and learn the language, so that we can share

God's love."<sup>12</sup> It may seem obvious, but clearly it has yet to be fully embraced as a practice: the way you do mission is by going or being sent to the place or to the church where God calls you. Few of us would respect a missionary who expressed all kinds of thoughts about reaching the people of the Ukraine but had never been there, and everyone knows that in order to be a missionary in a foreign context for the long haul, the best first step is to learn the language. With virtual worlds, the step into the mission field is tremendously simpler and more fluid than mission to foreign countries or new geographical contexts. If you have a computer and an Internet connection, you can be on Second Life or playing World of Warcraft in a matter of minutes—for free.

I would like to argue in the remainder of this essay that the primary theological task before us is for more of us actually to go there. Again, this doesn't sound like theology until and unless we embrace the truth that theology is, to a considerable degree, ethnography—or said in the reverse, that ethnography can be excellent Christian theology.<sup>13</sup> Pete Ward, in one of the early works in this move towards ethnography as theology, writes, "The convergence on culture marks a significant move in practical theology. Turning to culture means that doctrine is increasingly read in and through the social and the embodied and so 'theology' itself is seen in a new light."<sup>14</sup> I like to think of ethnography as theological in the sense that Michel de Certeau names it, as walking in the city: "To practice space [walk] is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, *to be other and to move toward the other*."<sup>15</sup>

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Walking around in a virtual world, though in many respects no different from walking around in a physical city, does highlight aspects of walking that we are less aware of in physical environments. If we decide to walk in the city, we probably select specific clothes to wear out and about. In the virtual world, you actually dress and create your avatar to represent you in that environment. These two practices, one in the real world and one in the virtual world, are not as dissimilar as they first appear, although the technology of the second draws attention to itself for most users more starkly than the clothing technologies of the first.

Pete Ward offers a vision of a "liquid church." He recognizes that the way church

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Estes, *SimChurch*, 226.

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, the recent collection of essays edited by Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

<sup>14</sup>Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* (London: SCM Press, 2008) 95.

<sup>15</sup>Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984) 110 (italics original).

has been in the past was itself a form of mediated identity, and he calls on the church to extend itself into new cultures and media. He explains, “Liquid Church expresses the way that ecclesial being is extended and made fluid through mediation. The liquid Church moves beyond the traditional boundaries of congregation and denomination through the use of communication and information technologies.”<sup>16</sup> How the church is mediated as new technologies arise is itself a missiological topic: “A central missiological issue for the Western Church relates to how it chooses to react to the mediation of the spiritual in popular culture.”<sup>17</sup>

Ward’s concept of liquid church offers a third way, one around the forced dichotomy between “real church” and “virtual church.” Instead, the church “goes with the flow” of the Spirit in the freedom of God, because the church is not *here* in one way and *there* in another, but is constantly extended, a flowing ecclesial life, through the mediation and participatory power of the message, who is also, in the case of Christian theology, also the messenger.<sup>18</sup>

I have the sense that my ELCA clergy colleagues on Facebook, as well-meaning as they are, sought a “theological analysis of virtual church ministry” because it would offer a conversation in our own language about a missiological context.<sup>19</sup> The actual analysis we have conducted here, however, has problematized the encounter, because if ethnography is Christian theology, then the kind of analysis we seek requires not the iteration of regular theological language in such a way as to speak virtually of the virtual church, but rather requires immersion in the actual context of the virtual world in order to learn the language, participate, and be mediated there, so that theology can be an exercise in a real ethnographic experience of the virtual, rather than a virtual conversation about the virtual we assume to be the real deal.

Woody Allen said that 90% of life is just showing up—and that applies equally well to ministry. So, go get your avatar and start walking around. ☩

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<sup>16</sup>Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, 137.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>18</sup>See John 1.

<sup>19</sup>For full disclosure, although I’m writing about immersive virtual worlds and challenging us to go there, I have only scratched the surface of what it means to be in these mission fields. My primary experiences have been through worship in Second Life and game play in World of Warcraft. I am seeking to listen to my own challenge as much as challenging readers to do the same.