



Real Virtual Community

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What is meant by “community”? This is one of the oldest puzzles posed by computer-based communication. Even in the early days of newsgroups, mailing lists, bulletin boards, and chatrooms, long before the invention of the Web or social media, users were already referring to their conversation groups as “communities.” They felt a sense of shared identity, built friendships through long conversations, and offered each other advice and emotional support.

Academics and theologians have been fascinated ever since by what this new kind of “community” might mean for religion and indeed for society. Researchers have argued at length about whether online communities can be “real,” what they are like, why people join them, and what benefits or dangers might be found there. For some, the Internet is a threat to “real” community, luring believers away from each other with the promise of easier, more convenient online relationships. For others, the Internet has quite the opposite effect: when users have easy, constant, often anonymous access to communication, relationships can become deeper, more interesting, more honest, and more supportive. To find a Christian response to online community, we need to work out what “community” really means. As we shall see, that isn’t as easy as we might expect.

This article will start by looking at two approaches to online community. The first approach is enthusiastic, seeing community as a kind of conversation that can

Virtual community can be real community. An example is the Church of Fools (now St Pixels), launched as an experiment eleven years ago, meant to last but three months. However, that experiment created a congregation that is still alive today, one in which people carry on public discussions with sufficient human feelings to form webs of personal relationships online.

take place online or offline. The second approach is much more critical of digital media, seeing true community as something essentially embodied, face-to-face, and local. I'll share one case study from my own research to describe an online group that I consider to be a real online community, and I'll use that example to help us think more helpfully about what community can be.

TWO APPROACHES TO ONLINE COMMUNITY

One of the first and best-known definitions of online community comes from Howard Rheingold, who argues that communities “emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”¹ In this definition, “community” depends on emotional bonds. There is no real difference here between a community and a friendship network, and no particular need for face-to-face interaction or shared neighborhoods. Conversation generates connection, and that means community.

We can find similar ideas in some recent Christian books. According to social media consultant Meredith Gould, “virtual community is real community.”² If you want proof, “just ask anyone who has invested enough time in online conversations about faith, spirituality, religion and church to discover the ever-expanding universe of support available within and beyond denominations.”³ You'll find that “online communities of faith are real to members who have come to rely on them for inspiration and support.”⁴ Gould is writing in 2013, about technologies that did not exist when Rheingold published his book twenty years before, but their argument is the same: “[T]ime and energy put into quality interaction is what makes a group of individuals who share interests and concerns become a community no matter where it's located.”⁵

In an issue of *Word & World*, Mary Hess observed that recent explorations of the theology of the Trinity have encouraged “a renewed and energetic defense of the essential relationality of Christian belief and of Christian community.”⁶ This theological understanding of community as relationships could be well suited to the relational understanding of online community promoted by Rheingold, Gould, and other enthusiasts. Some early digital theologians, like Debbie Herring, have indeed tried to use relational understandings of the Trinity to build a theological defense for the kinds of communities they were encountering online.

¹Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (New York: Perseus, 1993) 5.

²Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways* (Collegeville: Order of Saint Benedict, 2013) 27.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Mary Hess, “What Difference Does It Make? E-Learning and Faith Community,” *Word & World* 30/3 (2010) 283–284.

We can also find some support for this relational, emotional understanding of community in an essay John Christopherson wrote for *Word & World* fifteen years ago. Christopherson argues that Lutherans should think of community as the third sacrament, because the gathering of the church fulfils the criteria set out by Luther: it “contains God’s gift of forgiveness of sin,”⁷ and it was instituted by Christ. Christopherson is talking about a congregation coming together face to face, but the central theme of his understanding of community is “belonging.” According to Christopherson, the world today is characterized by “a cry for belonging—a hungering and thirsting for togetherness, affirmation, and community,” and “one of the greatest gifts the church has to offer is the gift of community, belonging—in Jesus’ name.”⁸ If a sense of belonging is the key to community, then the kinds of supportive, emotionally invested networks described by Rheingold and Gould could certainly count.

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For many Christians, however, “online community” is not quite so easy to find. The Catholic Church and its members have released a steady stream of documents, statements, and other commentary about the Internet for more than ten years, and “community” has been a frequent topic. In 2002, for example, a report by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications tried to strike a balance between enthusiasm and concern:

Although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel, it can complement them, attract people to a fuller experience of the life of faith, and enrich the religious lives of users. . . . [P]astoral planning should consider how to lead people *from cyberspace to true community* and how, through teaching and catechesis, the Internet might subsequently be used to sustain and enrich them in their Christian commitment.⁹

The report accepts that online resources and conversations can be valuable and should be part of the evangelistic and pastoral mission of the church. At the same time, the authors insist that we mustn’t mistake the virtual for the real. There is more to “community” than online interactions can provide, however emotionally supportive they may be. The word “incarnational” is a clue to the theological

⁷John R. Christopherson, “Christian Community as Sacrament,” *Word & World* 20/4 (2000) 406.

⁸*Ibid.*, 402.

⁹The Catholic Church, “The Church and the Internet” (Vatican: Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002), emphasis added; at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html.

foundation of this alternative approach, which starts with the value of materiality and embodiment rather than connections and relationships.

The Catholic Church's qualified enthusiasm for the Internet has been reiterated many times since 2002, particularly through the annual papal sermon for World Communications Day. In 2009, for example, Pope Benedict both encouraged and warned his audience. Digital media "respond to a fundamental desire of people to communicate and to relate to each other," he acknowledged, but the pope still urged caution: "It would be sad if our desire to sustain and develop friendships online were realised at the cost of the availability of the family, of neighbours and those we encounter in everyday reality."¹⁰

This distinction between different types of relationship also features in a *Word & World* article by Theresa Latini. Latini describes an approach to community that is rather more difficult and challenging than the emotional networks praised by Howard Rheingold and Meredith Gould. The Christian ideal of *koinonia* joins us in unity with Christ and one another, but "*koinonia* is not manufactured or created on the basis of socialization patterns or affinity groups. We don't get to choose the other to whom we are united, because *koinonia* is God's work."¹¹ An online network could be full of supportive conversations and emotional investment, but if that network is limited to our chosen friends then it doesn't meet the ideal.

Benedict XVI and Theresa Latini both make a distinction between the relationships we choose and those we do not, insisting that the appeal of friendship must not lure us away from our commitments to those around us. Catholic theologian Antonio Spadaro has developed this argument in his new book *Cybertheology*. We engage in complex friendships with the people we are forced to be close to, he explains, working through layers of disagreements and differences. An online friend, selected just because we enjoy exchanging words with them, is quite different. We need neighbors, not just friends.¹²

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Again in *Word & World*, pastors Adam White and Kae Evensen contributed short articles arguing for and against involvement with Facebook. Both articles are actually rather mixed in their verdicts, acknowledging advantages to Facebook but also drawing attention to some dangers. Instead of focusing on the difference between neighbors and friends, White and Evensen both emphasize our need for physical presence. Adam White argues that "technology can crowd out other ways

¹⁰Pope Benedict XVI, "New Technologies, New Relationships. Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship" (Vatican: 2009) at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.html.

¹¹Theresa Latini, "Engaging Our Imagination, Empathy, and Angst: How TV Shapes Community," *Word & World* 32/3 (2012) 261.

¹²Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet*, trans. Maria Way (New York: Fordham, 2014).

of relating. . . [W]e increasingly spend time physically present only to machines,” and “a laptop is a poor substitute for face-to-face flesh and blood.”¹³ Kae Evensen also emphasizes the need for face-to-face contact, using the physical theology suggested by the incarnation. Mediated communication can be valuable and inspiring, she admits, but the Christian faith insists that God “finally needed to show up in person.” “[O]ur faith is of the flesh.”¹⁴

So far, I’ve outlined two ways of thinking about online community. The first is positive and relational, defining community as a network of support built by emotional investment in communication and arguing that this kind of network emerges naturally from online conversations. The second is more ambivalent, emphasizing the need to balance online communication with engagement in embodied, face-to-face interactions, and insisting that real community has to be tied to places and neighborhoods.

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Before we move on, we should briefly consider how these two different understandings of community might be related. Sociologists Barry Wellman and Lee Rainie have argued that our society is undergoing a long-term shift from communities based in neighborhoods and families to personal networks based on the friendships we choose.¹⁵ The meaning of the word “community” is changing over time, to refer to more flexible, individual connections instead of tight-knit groups with stable membership and strong boundaries.¹⁶ Participation in all kinds of membership groups has been declining,¹⁷ undermining some of the most valuable kinds of social support but allowing individuals more freedom to choose their own relationships. Online networking is just one example of this long-term social trend. Critics who insist on face-to-face contact, local neighborhoods, and family obligations are arguing for a return to an older ideal of social life. We can still agree with the critics, of course, but we need to be careful not to judge online communities against standards that our offline communities can’t live up to either.

In another *Word & World* article, Clint Schneklath insists that theologians who want to make sense of digital media need to get online and experience it for

¹³Adam White, “Pastor on Facebook? We Might Learn Something,” *Word & World* 30/3 (2010) 328.

¹⁴Kae Evensen, “Pastor on Facebook? Not for Me,” *Word & World* 30/3 (2010) 331.

¹⁵Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

¹⁶Heidi A. Campbell, “Community,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2012) 57–71.

¹⁷Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

themselves.¹⁸ To make any progress with this debate over community, we need to follow that advice and look at a real example.

A CASE STUDY: CHURCH OF FOOLS

My first academic research project was a study of online churches and Christian groups using the Internet to worship, preach, pray, make friends, and share conversations. The first online churches appeared in the 1980s, and today you can go to church in almost every kind of digital space: forums, chatrooms, virtual worlds, games, Facebook, Twitter, and more. Many large “real-world” churches in America now run “online campuses,” encouraging visitors from around the world to watch their services through video streams and share their prayers and comments on Facebook or in a chatroom. Working out how to build and maintain community is a key issue for all online churches, so this is a useful case study for us to consider.

The example I’ll discuss here is the Church of Fools, a group founded more than ten years ago. Church of Fools was one of the first online churches to be sponsored by a Christian denomination, in this case the Methodists, and was launched in 2004. The church was set up as an experiment, designed to run entirely online for just three months in a small virtual world. Visitors could choose an avatar—a character to represent them on-screen—and pilot this around a small virtual church building, interacting with other users through typed words and animated gestures. The Church of Fools was run by a popular Christian website, Ship of Fools and—as the name suggests—the project had a humorous, even satirical edge. This was an attempt to bring together a community of worshipers united at least partly by their shared determination not to take church too seriously.

Church of Fools was at once familiar and unfamiliar. This was a virtual space, designed using the kind of computer animation more commonly seen in games, but it looked and sounded just like a traditional church. Wooden pews filled a stone hall, lined with pillars and lit by stained glass windows, with an altar at one end. This approach disappointed some of the visitors I’ve spoken to, who were hoping for something rather more radical, but others found the recognizability of the space reassuring. Simon Jenkins, one of the founders of the church, explains that the decision to create a traditional-looking space was intended to support a kind of missionary outreach: “[S]ince we wanted to appeal to people who never went to church, we decided that we wanted a church which said ‘church’ as soon as you saw it. . . . [W]e thought this ecclesiastical style would create atmosphere and give the whole thing a playful, experimental edge.”¹⁹

Church of Fools attracted a great deal of media attention from around the world. The idea of an “online church” appealed to journalists: this was a novel and

¹⁸Clint Schnekloth, “Virtual Church,” *Word & World* 32/3 (2012) 251.

¹⁹Simon Jenkins, “Rituals and Pixels: Experiments in Online Church,” *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3/1 (2008) 101, at <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/8291/1/jenkins.pdf>.

quirky project, bringing together an institution that often seems very traditional, conservative, and serious—the church—with the supposedly anarchic, silly world of online games. The story was covered in major newspapers and online news sites, and that high public profile helped to bring in tens of thousands of visitors.

Troublemakers soon discovered that they could also come into the virtual space, and began to interrupt worship services, shout rude things at clergy, and get in everyone's way. On one occasion in the first week, a visitor entered the pulpit and declared himself to be "the Evil One," and that incident led to another wave of worldwide news coverage. A more light-hearted group of participants began their own religious cult in the crypt beneath the church, kneeling in a corner and praying to a vending machine.

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Real friendships, deep conversations, and sincere acts of worship were also starting to emerge. In response to the frequent disruptions, teams of volunteers showed great commitment of time and energy to protect the church around the clock. Regular participants began talking together, day after day, sharing prayers, and encouraging each other. This online space also hosted frequent conversations between believers and nonbelievers, something not often seen in local churches. A group of atheists began visiting the church, claiming one section as "Atheist's Corner" and inviting visitors to debate theology with them.

Short prayer services started to happen, using liturgies invented by church participants. The church software only supported interaction through typed text and a small range of gestures, so liturgical forms of worship inviting brief congregational responses were more suitable than long sermons. Sharing the Lord's Prayer became an important activity for the church congregation, with a special format: every person present in the church would type the whole prayer simultaneously in their own favored version, creating a chaotic burst of words that filled the screen.

In its first few months of life, the Church of Fools experiment attracted thousands of visitors, including some who came back again and again, started to make friends, and began committing time and energy to help support the project. By the standards of Howard Rheingold, this was already a true online community. But who were these people? Before we decide if this kind of online gathering really counts as a community, we need to find out who was joining and what difference the church made for them.

THE CONGREGATION: WHO GOES TO CHURCH ONLINE?

It's fairly common for supporters of online ministry to claim that being online is an essential way to share the Christian message with the world today. If people start spending time somewhere new, then—according to this argument—the Christian church must find ways to join them. The Church of Fools experiment shared some of this rhetoric. In a 2004 interview, for example, Simon Jenkins argued that “there ought to be a church on the net. It's like someone has created a new town and no one has thought to build a church there. It's almost scandalous.”²⁰

One of the main stated goals of the Church of Fools project was to use digital media to share the experience of Christian community with a new audience. “We wanted to educate and inform people who would never darken the doors of a church about Christian worship and fellowship. We hoped to break down the barriers people have about going to church.”²¹ As we've already seen, the traditional design of the virtual space was one of the strategies chosen to help achieve these ambitions.

For some visitors, the Church of Fools does indeed seem to have helped overcome deep hostility. One visitor to the church was quoted as saying, “I have a friend who had a crisis this week. No way would he ever go to a real church. But he went to yours and said his first prayer in many years. You are providing a valuable site for him and others who might never go to a traditional house of worship.”²²

This is a moving story, but not a representative one. Most visitors to Church of Fools (certainly most regular visitors) already attended a local church and continued to do so, and this is a crucial point for us to understand if we want to make sense of online communities.

These were not faithful churchgoers led astray by the easy temptations of the Internet or Internet users converted to Christianity through a chance online encounter, but former churchgoers who had discovered an accessible and safe way to reconnect with Christian community.

Studies of online religion—including my own research—have repeatedly shown that online churches and other digital ministries are not tempting Christians away from local churches or encouraging high numbers of new conversions, any more than radio or TV ministries did for previous generations. Most of the online churches I've studied make no particular effort to be evangelistic in their activities, whatever their founders might have intended.

I have encountered a few people who go to church online instead of attending

²⁰Malcolm Doney, “Computer Church,” *Church Times*, November 2, 2006, at <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2004/14-may/features/computer-church>.

²¹Jenkins, *Rituals and Pixels*, 100.

²²*Ibid.*, 113.

a local church, but these were all people who had attended local churches in the past, given up due to ill-health or negative experiences, and then subsequently discovered online church (sometimes years later). These were not faithful churchgoers led astray by the easy temptations of the Internet or Internet users converted to Christianity through a chance online encounter, but former churchgoers who had discovered an accessible and safe way to reconnect with Christian community.

This is an important point, because so many of the criticisms of online community discussed above focus on the fear that digital media are a threat to our families, neighbors, and local congregations. When we understand that the evidence doesn't support these fears, we can start thinking more productively about what online networks and communities can—and can't—offer to Christian believers and their churches.

WAS CHURCH OF FOOLS A REAL COMMUNITY?

We've described what Church of Fools looked like, what it did, and who wanted to join, but we still need to decide if this counts as a real community. I am convinced that it does, even if we consider all of the criticisms I discussed above.

We can see something of the strength of the relationships formed in Church of Fools by looking at what happened after the experiment ended. Church of Fools was launched eleven years ago and intended to last just three months, but it created a congregation that is still alive today. After the small virtual-world space closed, some of the participants carried on their conversations through text-based forums, continued worshipping together in chatrooms, and began organizing regular face-to-face gatherings in the UK and eventually elsewhere. The church relaunched as "St Pixels" in 2006, using a new website that allowed members to write their own blogs, discuss issues in the forums, and pray or chat in the chatroom. St Pixels relaunched again in 2012 as a Facebook application, offering weekly worship services through social media, and it is still active in that form today. Many of the participants in St Pixels today have been friends ever since the Church of Fools began, if not longer. Some are now married to each other. Others have died, and the church has organized online memorial services to remember them.

If we look back at Howard Rheingold's definition of community, then Church of Fools certainly qualifies. Rheingold claimed that a community emerges when "enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships" online,²³ and that has happened here for more than ten years.

The idea that the Internet is a rival to local groups has worried many observers. The Catholic Church warned in 2002 that online interaction must not replace local churchgoing or "real interpersonal community," and Pope Benedict XVI worried in 2009 that online interaction might draw people away from their family,

²³Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 5.

neighbors, and face-to-face relationships. That doesn't seem to have happened in Church of Fools / St Pixels. Almost all participants are still regular local churchgoers, or people who had already given up local churchgoing because of illness, disability, or negative experiences. Instead of luring people away from real interpersonal community, this online church has helped participants to expand their interactions with Christian friends. In some cases, family members joined together, inviting their parents, children, or spouses to share their online church with them. Offline gatherings were common, and family members often came along.

Critics also argue that face-to-face conversations are somehow essential to real Christian community—"our faith is of the flesh," as Kae Evensen put it²⁴—but my experience suggests that Church of Fools could answer this criticism, too. Many of the participants in Church of Fools (and later St Pixels) did meet at face-to-face gatherings, but these events weren't essential to their friendships. Church members who met offline told me that they were not surprised by their encounters, because their conversations online had already given them a strong sense of what their online friends were like. Church of Fools encouraged participants to use pseudonyms, inventing new names for themselves, but deceptions were rare. For some people, the chance to hide behind a new name actually gave them the freedom to be honest about their doubts, fears, and struggles, without needing to worry about protecting their reputation.

Pope Benedict's concern for families and neighborhoods is not just about the perceived rivalry between online and offline, but also about our freedom to choose to whom we are connected. In Theresa Latini's discussion of *koinonia*, she insists that "we don't get to choose the other to whom we are united."²⁵ Again, Church of Fools has a good answer to this concern. In an online group like this, participants don't have the opportunity to choose who else gets to join their activities or their conversations. Church of Fools attracted members with very different theologies, personalities, and life experiences, and the group was much more diverse and sometimes more argumentative than any local church I've been to.

BACK TO THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY

This article has shared some of the main approaches to online community, and then described a particular example to see if that group might count. I've argued that Church of Fools really was (and still is) a community, even when we consider the many criticisms of online community that Christians have put forward. This group has maintained strong friendships over a decade, given members a sense of belonging, and acted as a powerful source of support, without luring participants away from their face-to-face obligations or making it easy to avoid difficult relationships.

I've also pointed out one limitation to the experiment: despite the stated

²⁴Evensen, "Pastor on Facebook?" 331.

²⁵Latini, "Engaging Our Imagination," 261.

goals of the project, online churches are often not particularly successful at attracting new audiences to hear the Christian message. To be clear, this doesn't mean that online evangelism itself is a bad idea. Lots of strategies are being used online to share Christian faith, some more effective than others, and I haven't tried to evaluate all the different approaches in this article. This example just reminds us the relationship between evangelism and community-building is not straightforward.

When considering online community, it's important to remember that different parts of the Internet encourage different social norms and different kinds of relationships. The gatherings that form in virtual worlds, for example, look and feel very different from Facebook groups, Twitter conversations, comments on a blog, or conversations in a chatroom watching a church video stream. Church of Fools was very different from Facebook, where participants use their real names, connect primarily to people they already know offline, and often try to construct an upbeat image of success and popularity to impress their families, friends, and colleagues.²⁶

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If we want to make sense of online community, we need to be very clear about what we want “community” to be, what we are using as our standard of comparison, and how we are going to look for our evidence. To write this article, I've chosen to focus on just one group, based on several years of my own ethnographic research, but different kinds of online spaces encourage very different kinds of interaction. If it's important to find ways to get along with people we disagree with and dislike, for example, then we may well conclude that some online spaces are more likely to support communities than others. The only way to expand this discussion is to keep experimenting with different kinds of online spaces and networks, and to keep reflecting on our digital experiences in conversation with one another. ⊕

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²⁶Evensen, “Pastor on Facebook?” 329, 331.