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The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online

Heidi A. Campbell

Heidi A Campbell

Professor of Communication,
Texas A&M University
Director, *Network for New Media,
Religion and Digital Culture Studies*

networked

theology

engaging culture

negotiating faith in digital culture

heidi a. campbell and stephen garner

THE CHURCH ISN'T EMPTY, THE CHURCH HAS BEEN DEPLOYED!
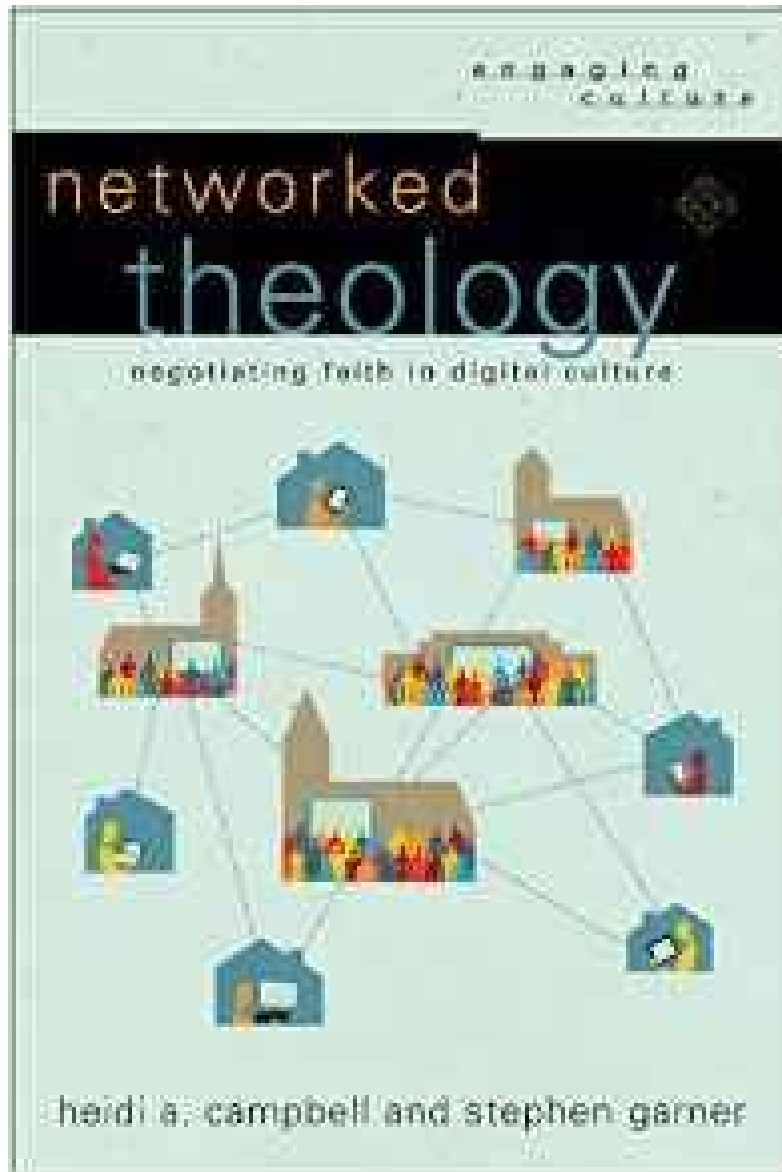
The Distanced Church

Reflections on Doing Church Online
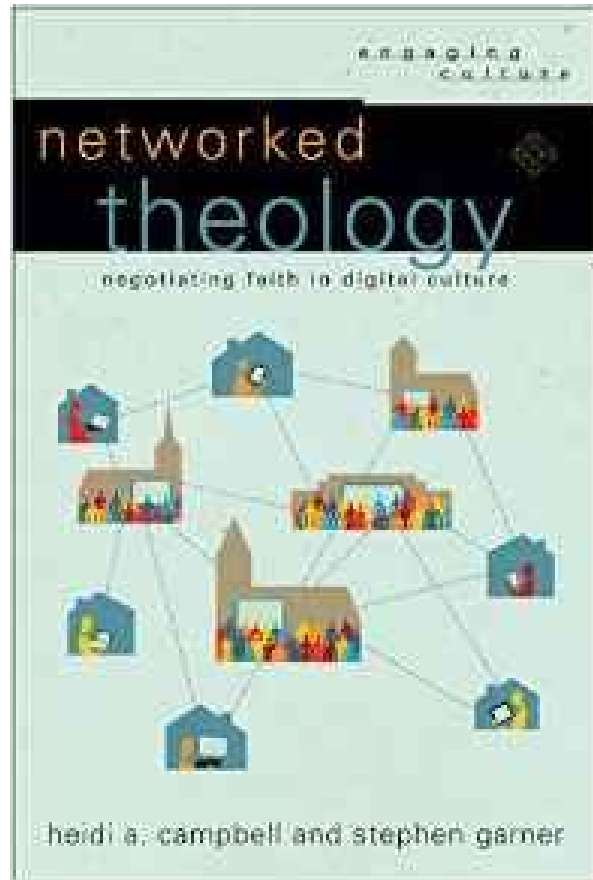
Heidi A Campbell, Editor
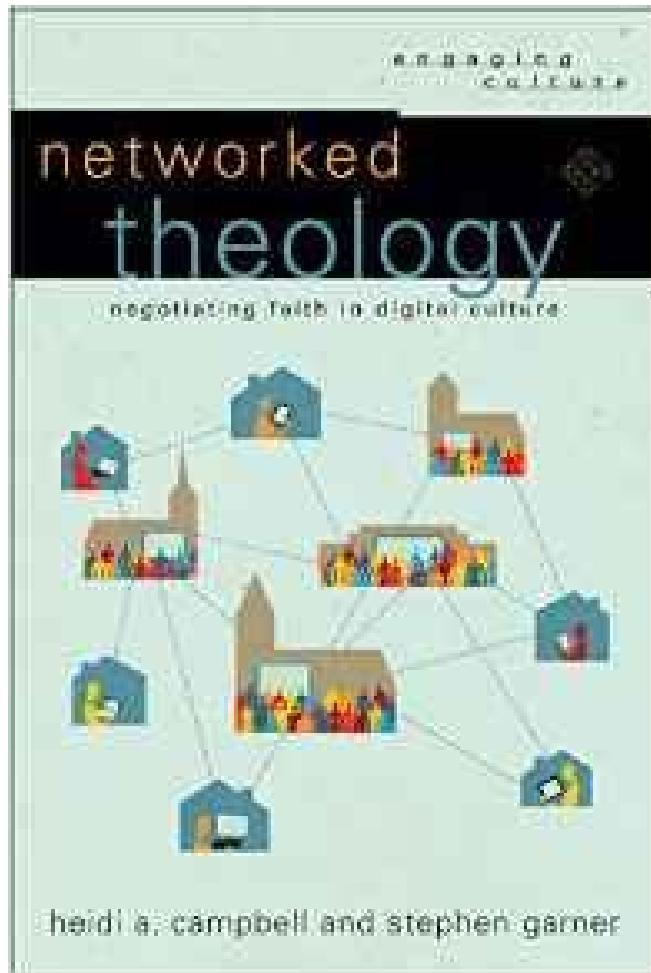
Towards a Networked Theology

A Conversation with a
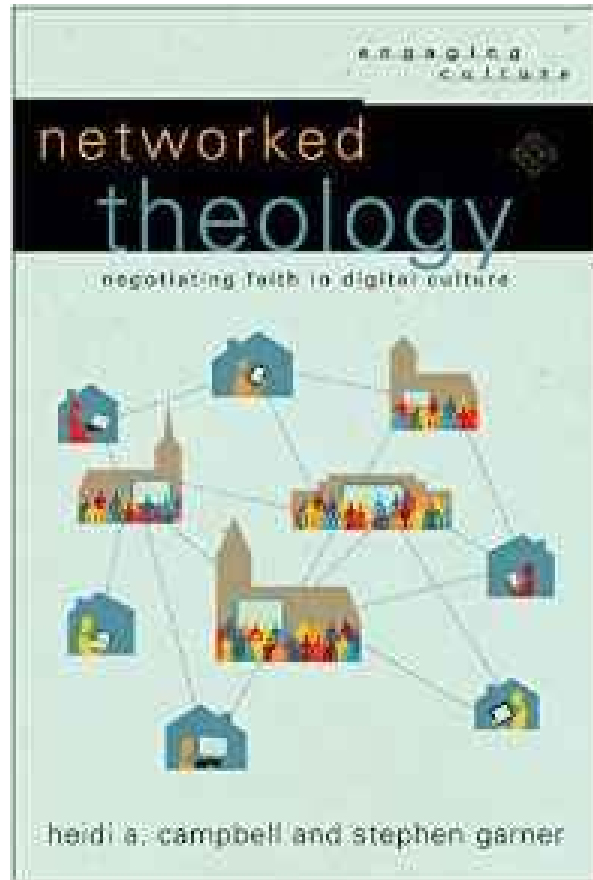Media Scholar & Theologian
on Digital Media Culture and the Church

Towards a Networked Theology

If there's one single thing that characterizes emerging forms of church across the western world it's that they are networked.

- Steve Collins, "Network Church" (2004)

Networked Theology argues-

Religious Practices reflects trends & conditions of a Network Society

* Social relations increasingly decentralized & interconnected through social-technical infrastructure (Castells 1996)

* loosening & re-presentation of traditional boundaries & practices

- Religious community as a *network*, authority is *shifting*, practice is *convergent*

Towards a Networked Theology
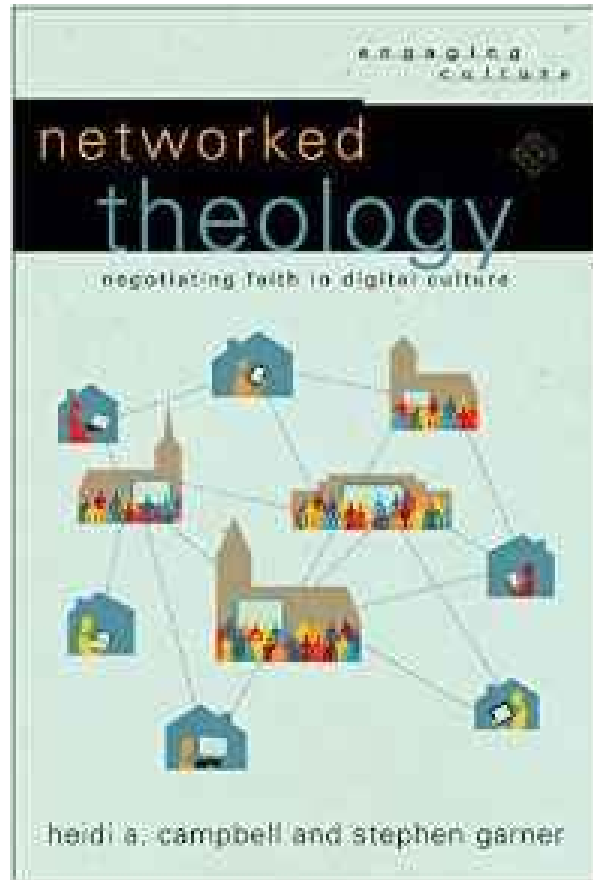
Networked Theology as… a framework for personal & communal reflection based on understanding how digital culture functions and how this shapes how faith is practiced a network society

- Theology <u>must</u> be in dialogue with technology practice and media culture

"faithfully engaging technology & theology as a networked relationship"

-17-
What Religious Groups Need to Consider when Trying to do Church Online
Heidi A Campbell

> *While many churches are focused on the technological requirements and digital skills needed to take their worship online, it is the interactive communication and relational aspects of digital community that people most _____ desire in their experiences of church online.*

Social Distancing Leads to Rethinking Church

Since the middle of March, I have spent my Sunday mornings watching portions of over 50 different church services streaming on my Facebook feed. I have been able to visit a variety of Episcopalian, Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, nondenominational and evangelical churches around the USA and Europe. Many of these churches are streaming their services online for the very first time. As I watched these varied attempts to take offline worship online, one question kept coming to mind: Do these churches really know what it means to do church online? This is a question I have been pondering over the last twenty-five years as someone who has studied religious communities' use of digital media.

In the 1990s I began investigating what religious communities look like online and how people compare them to their offline faith communities. I have watched over time how different Christian groups have used emerging media to take their services online and tried to create religious communities online. Over and over, and in the multiple research studies I have

conducted, I find most pastors and churches focus their attention on the pragmatic aspects of doing church online. This includes asking what platform is best to use and easiest to learn, what technology resource is most cost-effective, and what aspect of a church service needs some modification in its livestreaming format. Yet these are not the key questions people ask when seeking out a religious community online. In my first book, *Exploring Religious Community Online* (2005), based on in-depth online and offline research I conducted in the mid-1990s to early 2000s, I documented a series of desired traits that kept people invested in a particular online religious community. Even though I have been talking and writing about these findings for two decades, as I reviewed the examples of churches popping up online during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, it seemed religious leaders have not given attention to my observations and the advice I have tried to offer over and over again.

As priests and pastors have rushed to find new ways to provide church service experiences for their members, the internet has become the go-to alternative for replacing traditional face-to-face worship. The result has been a wide range of how-to guides and articles being circulated to pastors via social media with advice on how to livestream their sermons or create a makeshift online gathering. However, I argue in this article few people are asking the most important question: What do people need from churches right now? And how might digital technology be best used to meet those needs?

Desired Traits of Community Online

While digital technologies have changed over the past two decades, one thing that has not changed in my observations is what people are looking for when they go online to experience

and value in their interactions and place in the groups. Over the past two decades, I have done multiple studies looking at different manifestations of church online. Over and over, I hear these same traits echoed in interviews of what people value most about the relationships and communities they are invested in, both online and offline.

Observations and Trends in this Season of Doing Church Online

I have watched with curiosity over the last month as three dominant strategies emerged regarding religious leaders seeking to do church online. The most common strategy is transferring their standard offline worship services to an online platform, with Facebook livestreaming being the most popular option. This is especially true for priests and pastors from mainline churches (i.e., Methodist, Episcopal) intent on simply transferring their traditional worship services online. Many church leaders filmed themselves in empty sanctuaries, alone, or with a few assistants singing psalms, offering calls and responses to liturgical readings, and staring close range into the camera while broadcasting a sermon to their members. Their goal seems to be to offer members a somewhat similar worship service but in the safety of their own homes.

A few others used a translation strategy, as they tried to modify their worship rituals and space to fit onto a limited screen. Here, I saw many nondenominational and interdenominational churches, who were already used to using media in their services, creating makeshift studios to host their online services. They seemed to translate their worship experience into more of a talk show format, where a pastor served as a host introducing the worship band as if they were musical guests and cuts to church leaders interviewing other staff

members about their thoughts on the current pandemic and what a Christian response might look like. Some attempts to translate worship from offline to online include a limited interactive element, such as encouraging members to ask questions about to what they saw via Facebook comments or a Twitter feed.

These strategies of transferring or translating church are services that mirror or modify specific aspects of normal worship practices. Their aim seemingly was to replicate the core aspects of Christian worship—singing, scripture reading, and preaching—in easily identifiable ways. However, there was a third option available to churches, that of transforming public worship, though this was only seen in three online services I observed.

In one Anglican, one evangelical, and one Nazarene online church service, I saw church leaders appearing to use the shift to online as an opportunity to rethink the essence of the church—what do members need—and transforming their worship services accordingly. Here, the standard "praise and worship sandwich"—joyful praise songs followed by an emotional sermon and then reflective worship music—was abandoned for more of a "fireside chat model." The pastor or senior ministers sat on couches as if they were having a conversation with their members, offering honest reflection on their own struggles with the pandemic situation and creating a dialogue between themselves and their members, asking members to share their prayer requests and thoughts in real time via social media or texts during and after the broadcast service.

Online Strategy	Opportunity	Challenge	Tech Requirement
TRANSFER	Practical & Familiar	Broadcast Model	Platform knowledge (Facebook/YouTube)

TRANSFER

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St. Luke's Episcopal Church was live.
Sunday at 9:12 AM · 🌐

410 Views

Svenska kyrkan Håbo p... · Follow
2 hrs · 🌐

Morgonbön för Skärtorsdag

Låt oss be den bön som vår Herre Jesus själv har lärt oss.

👍 5   12 Shares   348 Views

Online Strategy	Opportunity	Challenge	Tech Requirement
TRANSLATE	Adapt & Relate	Limited Connection	Understanding Interactivity (Zoom)

TRANSLATE

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Online Strategy	Opportunity	Challenge	Tech Requirement
TRANSFORM	Rethink worship & Re-imagine Community	Church Re-presented	Digital Storytelling (Multi-Platforms)

TRANSFORM

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Wolverine Free Methodist Church
March 25 at 4:09 PM · 🌐

Fireside Chat 8

A chat that opens with a shout out to b... See More

Reflections on Doing Church Online

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Online Strategy	Opportunity	Challenge	Tech Requirement
TRANSFER	Practical & Familiar	Broadcast Model	Platform knowledge (Facebook/YouTube)
TRANSLATE	Adapt to Tech & Relate	Create True Connection	Understanding Interactivity (Zoom)
TRANSFORM	Rethink worship & Re-imagine Community	Church Re-presented	Digital Storytelling (Multi-Platforms)

Pastoral Reflections-Be Flexible & Experiment

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Reflections on Networked Theology
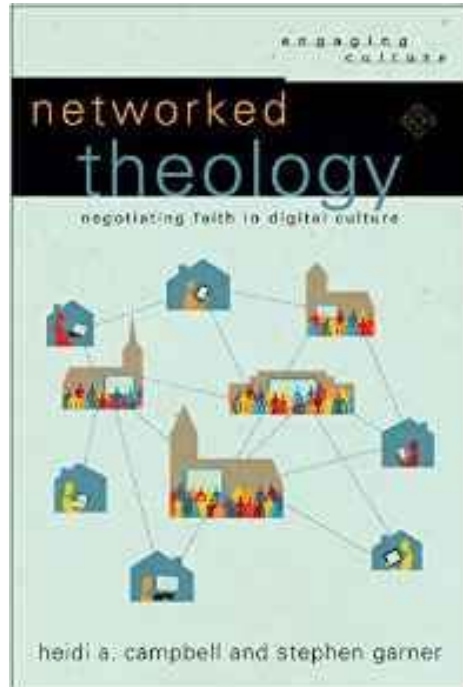
- Accept that people meet God & grow spiritually in digital spaces
- Must be rooted in the online & offline; mediated & embodied realities should connect
- Consider what resources (tech & tradition) needed to inform Theological discourse about digital culture

Lessons from *The Distanced Church*

THE CHURCH ISN'T EMPTY,
THE CHURCH HAS BEEN DEPLOYED!

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Reflections on Doing Church Online

Heidi A Campbell, Editor

- **Be willing to experiment, Beta test**

- **Recruit Digital Creatives as Collaborators & Helpers**

- **Reflect on Connection Between Theology/Mission & Digital Strategy**
  (Dulles- Institution, Servant, Herald, Sacrament, Mystical Communion and/or Community)
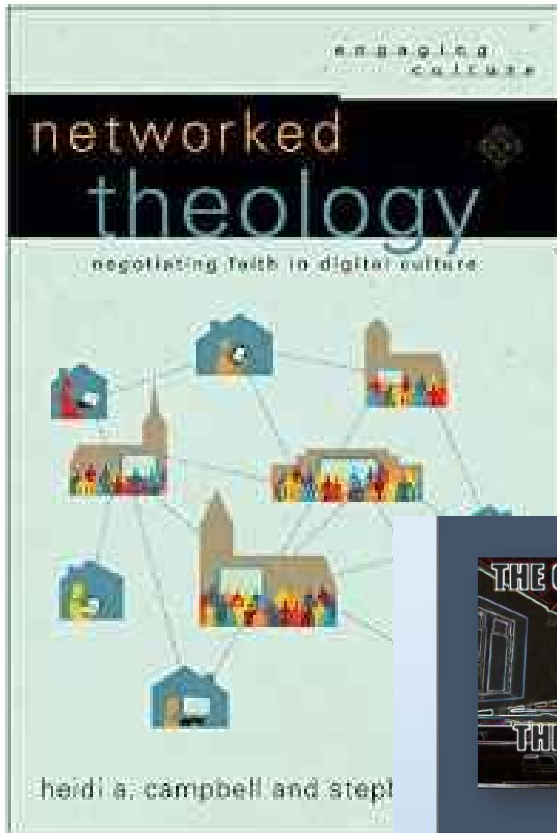
Thank You!

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Web: Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies

http://digitalreligion.tamu.edu