

**AN INVESTIGATION OF THE
NATURE OF THE CHURCH
THROUGH AN ANALYSIS OF
SELECTED EMAIL-BASED
CHRISTIAN ONLINE COMMUNITIES**

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DECLARATION

I certify that I have composed this thesis and that it is original material not previously submitted for another degree or professional qualification.

Heidi Campbell
14 November 2001

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates Christian online communities, with special emphasis on studying the nature of community and cyberspace. The purpose is to identify characteristics of community that individuals are seeking to cultivate in the online setting, showing possible implications for individuals in the "real world" church and offline communities. The key research question is: "What does online communication offer individual Christians and groups of Christians? How is the Internet changing Christians' interaction with the real world Christian Church?"

The literature review on the topics of community, the Internet and online religion begins with theological definitions of community being combined with Social Network Analysis. Community is defined as a network of relationships between individuals connecting to a common purpose, whose bonds are created and sustained through shared traits and beliefs. The Internet, the "network of all connected networks" and cyberspace, a metaphorical space laden with distinct interpretations of what is real and what is virtual in a technological world, are explored as a space utilising new ways of communicating and being. Online community combines traditional traits of community with a new technological setting and is defined as individuals assembling through Internet technology to form a network of interdependent relationships based on a common vision, care and communication. These explorations provide groundwork for studying online Christian communities, online groups who share a common Christian commitment and unite through a specific faith-based discussion topic.

Case study methodology is used to explore three Christian-email communities. They were selected on the basis of common online practices, yet represented diverse theological groups. The Community of Prophecy is a Charismatic-Renewal group focused around the gift of prophecy. The Online Church is an evangelical group of sensory impaired individuals. The Anglican Communion Online is a group with links to the Anglican Church. A three-phase research strategy is employed. Phase one involves participant-observation in selected online communities. Phase two involves distribution and analysis of online questionnaires to online community members. Phase three involves face-to-face interviews. These discussions tested out online observations and investigated how individuals link their online and "real world" communities.

Each case study is analysed with data presented under four themes. First, The Online Community and the Online Context examined how each community used Internet technology and adapted to the online environment. Secondly, The Online Community and the Real World investigated how each community links online experiences with real world activities. Thirdly, The Online Community as a Community considered how each online group develops unique patterns of behaviour and a common identity. Finally, The Online Community Reflects on the Church demonstrated how members critique the real world Church community through the positive characteristics of online community they experienced.

Through this study three conclusions are drawn. First, online involvement is not causing people to leave their local church or shy away from real world participation. Secondly, people join online communities primarily for relationships not information; relationships often noted as lacking in the offline Church. Thirdly, members' descriptions of online community and reasons they give for online involvement provide a critique of the real world Church. Also the attributes of online community highlighted (relationship, care, value, consistent communication and in-depth/intimate communications) offer a picture of what individuals hope a Christian community of the Church to be like.

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¹ Forthcoming article: Heidi Campbell, ‘They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Log-On: A Review of Religious Computer-Mediated Communication Research’, in *Studies in Media, Culture and Religion*, ed. by Sophia Marriage and Jolyon Mitchell (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002)

² Heidi Campbell, ‘A New Forum for Religion: Spiritual Pilgrimage Online’, in *TransMissions*, (Summer 2001), pp. 8-9.

³ Forthcoming article Heidi Campbell, ‘Ethical Implication of Online Research’, in *2002 Pfeiffer & Jones Annuals* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, November 2001)

⁴ Forthcoming article: Heidi Campbell, ‘Congregations of the Disembodied’, in *Virtual Morality*, ed. by Mark Wolf (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002)

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INTRODUCTION

In this 'congregation' we can't hide much. We don't stay isolated in our bubbles with our own burdens and struggles. We get stripped of our masks (they don't work well by email). Although we are from all over the world, all different from each other, our distinctiveness from each other has lost it's separateness... Can anything else live this out more than an email 'congregation' where we know nothing about each other than the common bond of Christ--the bond of LOVE?

(CP email, Date sent: Tue, 24 Mar 1998 19:10:11, Subject: school feedback)

Can a group of people, whose congregation is purely through electronic mail, truly be regarded as a community? Can online relationships be as authentic as interactions taking place in a local church? What is community? What is the church?

The emergence of online communities raises these and many other questions. Online communities provide meeting places for people not linked to a physical space. Rather they are created through the technology of email lists, the World Wide Web (WWW) and chat rooms. These electronic tools connect people to others in their local area or from around the world. Yet just as attending a church does not make one part of the Christian community, being part of a Christian email list does not mean the group is a community either. As the number of Christian web sites and electronic discussion groups increase, the link between what is the church and what is Christian community needs to be re-evaluated. For some the personal relationships occurring in the online context can become more intimate and valued than those interactions occurring in their local church. When this takes place individuals may see their Christian community as coming from the online context rather than the place where they "physically" locate themselves for worship each week. Some critics fear disembodied worship, arguing online community is an illusion. Yet, research is showing many are reclaiming a lost sense of relationship and encouragement through their online involvement. Discovering how online relationships and Christian communities are formed and how these affect individuals' involvement in the local church therefore has become a fascinating new area of inquiry.

The Internet has introduced a new terrain needing to be defined and contextualised, as well as explored. "The Internet" is a term used to identify the vast array of wires and computer network connections, and is what most people use when referring to the WWW as they are navigate their way though websites and accessing their email. Cyberspace is often used synonymously to refer to the Internet. It is a "virtual" world where technology and fantasy

meet somewhere beyond the user's computer screen. William Gibson coined the term cyberspace in his 1984 science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, to describe the realm the story's hero enters when he connects a computer directly into his brain and cyberspace. Gibson described it as "a consensual hallucination...a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system...lines of light ranged in the non space of the mind."¹ This poetic image illustrates how cyberspace and the Internet are seen to bring together the real and the virtual. The description envisions a mystical realm where people do not simply use technology; they become part of the computer network.

Virtual reality discussions and images dominated the beginnings of the Internet's proliferation into mainstream culture in the early 1990s, and by the mid-1990s "virtual community" emerged as the newest Internet buzzword. Virtual community was used to describe the group relationships many computer users were forming online. These Internet-based communities were seen as new social spaces enabling human interaction in the digital world. Starting as grassroots communities on newsgroups or electronic bulletin boards, virtual communities soon became facilitated and promoted by commercial web sites and e-businesses. By encouraging users to form special interest groups around specified topics they hoped to attract more traffic to their web sites. Later the term "virtual community" was dropped in favour of the label online communities, as virtual community seemed to infer something false about the relationships that were emerging. Throughout the 1990s increasing numbers of people sought out and created online communities, ranging from such diverse topics as stamp collecting and African politics to single parenting. At the same time as community online emerged, the Internet became seen as a social sphere as much as an information gathering tool.

As Internet usage and digital social interaction has increased researchers have found making the distinction between "online" and the "real world" crucial in order to describe this phenomenon and compare these with manifestations of community offline. "Online" is applied to that which takes place in a computer network environment, such as interaction facilitated through the Internet. The "real world" refers to public and private interactions in daily life occurring within the physical world. Similarly the term "offline" is used to describe any facet of life occurring outside the computer screen. Often the distinction between the two blurred as people took advantage of the Internet's absence of social cues to

¹ William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Book, 1984), p. 51.

experiment with new identities and ways of being online. In the late 1990s discussion of online religion and cyberchurch began to surface as proponents and pundits of technology began to be concerned about the potential effects technology was having on the culture of religion. Fears were voiced that online religion would cause people to abandon their pews in exchange for worship via a keyboard and computer screen, further affecting the steady decline of “real world” church attendance. “Real world” church referred to churches existing and functioning in the physical world whether tied to a specific geographic location such as a local church or a denominational grouping. In the new millennium online religion and online community continue to be topics of debate and investigation.

David Bell in *An Introduction to Cybercultures* offers a current and comprehensive synopsis of debates and research findings related to online community. Bell starts his examination of the arguments surrounding the concept of community in “late-modernity” highlighting several symptoms of these times. He includes: detraditionalisation, the shift towards a “post-traditional” society; disembedding, no longer being situated in a specific place but moving with flows; and globalisation, increased connectedness with people and places dispersed around the world.² This presents a new context and opportunity to “imagine new forms of community”.³

After laying out the arguments of online community advocates and critics, he concludes that researchers are left with two choices in the discussion of online community. Either they can find ways to enlarge the concept of community and its practice or they can replace community with an entirely new concept that more suitably describes these emerging online social groups.⁴ He offers the concept of *Bund*, or communion, as expressed in the work of Kevin Hetherington,⁵ stating that talking of an online *Bund* may enable researchers to bypass the problematic components associated with debates of online community. Bell calls for an examination of community on a relational basis, with emphasis placed on “the sharing of the relationship between beings as constitutive of community”.⁶ Focusing on relational components of online communities such as “social contracts” which bind and attract members, he argues this is more crucial than language which can become a stumbling block to the rewriting of community in cyberspace. Therefore re-examining traditional

² David Bell, *An Introduction to Cybercultures* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 95.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵ See Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of Identity: space, performance and politics* (London: Sage Publications, 1998)

⁶ Bell, p. 109.

terminology and definitions associated with community is encouraged for future studies of online social group functions.

This research project began in 1997 with an essay entitled “Virtual Communities in Cyberspace”, written as part of a Master’s course in the Theology and Ethics of Communication at New College. The essay looked at the emergence and definition of virtual communities and questions their existence raises in general society. The essay concluded that virtual communities would continue to grow on the Internet. Virtual community demonstrated technology was being used to bring people back into relationship in a digital world that seems to separate them more and more from face-to-face contact with others. This initial investigation sparked off questions as to how virtual community might influence religion and Christian community. In taking these ideas further, this study has focused its investigation on the emergence of Christian online communities, considering how online community relationships and communication habits are formed and identifying how individuals link their “online” and “real world” communities. Thus, this thesis will investigate Christian online communities, with special emphasis on studying the nature of community in cyberspace. The purpose is to identify characteristics of community individuals highlight about the online setting, showing possible implications for individuals in the “real world” church and off-line communities.

An important stimulus for the focus of this study came through reading Sherry Turkle’s *The Second Self* in which she explores how utilising computers not only influences attitudes and behaviour towards the technology itself, but also the way in which individuals respond and behave towards other people. She begins her sociological study by asking, “The question is not what the computer will be like in the future but instead, WHAT WILL WE BE LIKE? What kind of people are we becoming?”⁷ This question became the starting point for considering how online culture might influence religious culture. By applying this question specifically to online community and Christian culture it was re-stated as:

How is engagement with the Internet and the emergence of the online community changing the nature of relationships within society? WHAT WILL THE CHURCH BE LIKE? How are people in the Christian community being transformed because of involvement in online communities?

⁷ Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self. Computers and the Human Spirit* (London: Granada, 1984), p. 3.

In an effort to identify how the Internet influences individual conceptions of church and community this thesis combines the fields of Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) and Practical Theology. CMC refers to technology used to communicate via computer networks. CMC studies explore developments related to the Internet, cyberspace and computer technology and the psychological and sociological effects these have on people's communication patterns and behaviour. In Practical Theology topics of the theology of community and religious response to technology were considered. The starting questions of this inter-disciplinary exploration have been:

What does online communication offer individual Christians and groups of Christians? How is the Internet changing Christians' interaction with the real world Christian Church?

The research strategy selected to answer this question was case study methodology. A three-phase research approach of three online email-based communities was employed. Participant-observation, questionnaires and face-to-face interviews provided the necessary data to answer this central question of how online Christian communities are influencing the Church.

Yet, before this main question was addressed, several foundational areas were explored in order to set this study in context. These areas of inquiry, defining community, the Internet and cyberspace and online community, served to uncover essential background information related to the fields of study and aided in setting the parameters for the investigation of Christian online communities. It was not the intention to explore these areas in their entirety; rather they were explored in relation to the specific topic of online Christian Communities. Foundational areas of inquiry were explored and presented in chapters one through four.

In chapter one, *Ways of Viewing Community*, theological and sociological definitions and understandings of the concept of community are explored. In chapter two, *Understanding the Internet and Cyberspace*, the technological and commercial development of the Internet is explored along with a discussion of the roots and development of the concept of cyberspace. In chapter three, *Online Community and Online Christianity*, the online community is explored and defined along with an examination of how Christian practices have been transported and adapted to the online environment. In chapter four, *Research Methodology: A Case for Case Study*, the research methodology is described with the evaluation strategy for the case studies being clearly defined. Exploring these areas and defining the parameters

of the aspects helped set this study within the context of an interdisciplinary investigation centring on the fields of Computer-mediated Communication and Theology.

The conclusions of chapters one through four provided the information necessary to construct the research questions serving as evaluative tools applied to the case study portion of this research project. The literature review aided in formulating the chosen methodology and refining its application in this specific study. In chapters five, six and seven three case studies of email-based online Christian communities are profiled with data and findings being presented under specific themes relating to the online context, the real world, community and the Church. Chapter five, *Case Study One: The Community of Prophecy*, investigates an email list with a Charismatic focus on the topic of the New Testament use of the gift of prophecy. Chapter six, *Case Study Two: The Online Church*, highlights an evangelical email list for visually challenged Christians. Chapter seven, *Case Study Three: The Anglican Communion Online*, is an email list focused around faith and commitment to the Anglican Communion. Finally in chapter eight, *We Are One in the Network: Conclusions*, a final analysis of the data presented in chapters five through seven is given, highlighting the attributes of community individuals desire in community emerging from this study.

CHAPTER 1

WAYS OF VIEWING COMMUNITY

INTRODUCING COMMUNITY AND RESEARCH FOCUS

*"No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, part of the main...because I am involved in Mankind."*¹ - John Donne

Humans exist not in isolation, rather they are "communal creatures", interconnected through social patterns and behaviours. Communities are often considered the basic building blocks of a society and come in many forms. They signify not just a sense of space, but also social relationships. Traditional understandings of community are often rooted in three key elements: territory, social system and a sense of belonging.² This is aptly illustrated by the definition given in *Collins English Dictionary* for community: "1) the people living in one locality; 2) groups of people having cultural, religious, ethnic or other characteristics in common; 3) a group of people having certain interests in common".³ The term is often used in a fixed or idealistic sense to describe a certain geographic boundary or group of individuals who live in a specific area or the ideal relationship of a given people or area. However, a community is more than its physical location. *The Oxford Dictionary* definition highlights another aspect of community, stating community is about "fellowship being alike in some way, a community of interest."⁴ This definition stresses interaction through a common interest, emphasising what is held in common rather than location. While helpful as a starting point these definitions do not fully answer the question, "What is community?"

The focus of this thesis is investigating communal relationships in both "real world" and online settings and considering how these groups form, create identities for themselves and function. Identifying what a community is and the reasons individuals enter into communal relationships becomes crucial to understanding the phenomena of online communities. An underlying claim in this thesis is that the existence of community online challenges traditional conceptions of community. Understandings of community are commonly tied to

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 190.

² Margret Stacey, 'The Myth of Community Studies' in *The Sociology of Community*, ed. by C. Bell & H. Newby (London: Franks Cass, 1974), pp. 13-26.

³ *Collins English Dictionary* (TSB, 1992), p. 313.

⁴ *The Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 122.

geography and categories, which serve as boundaries. Yet, since the communities in question exist through computer technology, traditional definitions and conceptions of community need to be re-examined to see if they are able to describe accurately this new setting.

In this chapter the question “What is community?” is briefly approached through two disciplines: theology and sociology. Many theological understandings of community concentrate on what they see as a community’s purpose, to reflect God and his relationships within the Trinity and creation. Theology also offers models of how various communities of faith conceive and live out their purpose. Sociology describes the order and structure of community and provides examples of how people build relationships and relate to one another.

The chapter does not aim to debate the full range of options of images or tools related to community, rather it explores specific aspects of community that could be utilised in a combined discussion of theology and sociology. First, a theological reading of community is offered highlighting several images and the language of community in the Bible. This includes an investigation of the relationship between the concepts of church and community in Scripture. Also four models of the church as a community are presented as a basis for later evaluation. Secondly, a sociological reading of community is outlined beginning with a historical overview of how the community question has been approached. Then a specific sociological approach to community, Social Network Analysis, is offered to illuminate a networked perspective of community especially relevant to the online setting. Thirdly, the theological discussion and a Social Network Analysis reading of community are linked. Then approaching community, specifically Christian community as “story-formed” is spotlighted as an additional tool for explaining community relationships. Finally, this leads to summarising the idea of community presented in this chapter to be utilised in subsequent chapters for describing online and real world Christian communities. The purpose of this chapter is to formulate a working definition of community, which is applicable to the study of online community relationships.

COMMUNITY FROM A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In order to understand community from a Christian theological perspective, specific Biblical texts combined with various interpretations are considered. The premise is that Christian

theology has approached community from a unique perspective; communal relationships are understood as directed and brought together by God. The intention of this section is to highlight images, language and models already present within theological discourse of community. This will provide elements which can be used to offer a new understanding of community.

Initially several Biblical images of Christian community are presented, focusing on the image of marriage and the human community as a mirror of the heavenly community of Trinity. Next the Biblical language of community, *ekklesia* and *koinonia*, is explored to describe how understandings of the words community and church have emerged and their relationship to each other. Finally four theological models emphasising distinct interpretations of the function of Christian community are discussed providing insight into how the Church defines and operates as a community. The themes of interconnection and relationships will emerge and assist to re-contextualise traditional theological understandings of community. Emphasis in this section is on providing the building blocks for the re-definition process.

Important to note is that the word “church” is used in two different contexts in this chapter and throughout this thesis. When it is written as “Church”, with a capital letter C, it refers to the universal, Catholic and global Church or to the Church as a structure. When written as “church”, with a small letter c, it refers to a local church group or in the general sense to a gathering of Christians for the purpose of worship.

BIBLICAL IMAGES OF COMMUNITY

This theological survey of community begins with considering various Biblical texts. Numerous metaphors describe how church and community are conceived of throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament the community of Israel is referred to as the well-watered garden (Jeremiah 31:12), God’s treasured possession (Deuteronomy 7.6) and a vineyard (Isaiah 27.2). In the New Testament Jesus describes followers of God as the Kingdom of God, the community of heaven, using such images as a city (Matthew 5.14) and a flock (John 10.16). Other New Testament writers picture the church as living stones (I Peter 2.5) and dearly loved children (Ephesians 5.1). Paul Minear in *Images of the Church in the New Testament* outlines 96 images for the church present in the Bible.⁵ Here, however, focus is on the

⁵ Consult: Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961)

Biblical image of community as “marriage” and Trinity. The image of bride and groom offers a picture of an intimate human community and connection, and Trinity offers an image of divine inter-relationship.

To fully comprehend the image of marriage it is essential first to consider the Trinity, the divine community which human relationships are intended to mirror. In *After Our Own Likeness*, Miroslav Volf explores community through the image of the Trinity, and articulates the problematic nature of such a task. He says the Trinity is a mystery which humans can worship but not fully imitate. Yet, human history is moving towards a final reality to be experienced through the indwelling of the triune God in the world. Thus “any reflection on the relation between Trinity and church must take into account both God’s uniqueness and the world’s purpose in becoming of the triune God, which corresponds to the triune God himself,” claims Volf.⁶

Offering an overview of theological ideas about the relationship between Church and Trinity, he focuses on the tension “between the one and the many” or unity through multiplicity. With Moltmann and Pannenberg, he looks at Trinitarian relations through a social model, suggesting Trinity is about relationships of divine nature and divine persons. “Each divine person stands in relation not only to other persons, but is also a personal centre of action internal to the other persons.”⁷ This indicates a slight differentiation in the constitution of person and their relations. As Volf states, “The Son and the Spirit are constituted by the Father. The Father is the source from which the Son and Spirit receive their divinity; he constitutes the ‘hypostatic divinity’ of the Son and Spirit.”⁸ Their relations establish their constitution; they have unity because of the nature of their relationships.⁹

The Trinity is not only a complementary relationship, but also a communion of divine persons. Volf argues that one can not have a relationship with Christ without interacting with Father and Holy Spirit. Thus, the personhood of the Trinity cannot be separated from its relational focus as “person and relation emerge simultaneously and mutually presuppose

⁶ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Own Likeness. The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1998), p. 192.

⁷ Volf, p. 203

⁸ Volf, p. 216.

⁹ While I am aware of the diversity of understandings concerning the Doctrine of the Trinity especially as they relate to discussion concerning the constitution, actions and relations of the Trinity, I have chosen to narrow my focus to Volf’s discussion because of his emphasis on Trinity as a “gathered community” providing a model for Church relationships.

each other”.¹⁰ Through his focus on the Trinitarian social relationship, Volf seeks to emphasise the relational side of ecclesiastical associations. The local church can be seen as an image of the Trinity when it reflects its same relationships. For “...the relations of the trinitarian persons finds its correspondence in the image of the church in which *all* members serve one another with their specific gifts of the Spirit in imitation of the Lord through the power of the Father”.¹¹ The church can share in Trinitarian unity as it recognises “indwelling of the *one* Spirit... *in every person*”.¹² Yet this likeness for the people of God is more in the “not yet” than it is in the now. It also requires looking to the final end of humankind when this calling to live in perfect communion with the Triune God will be realised as the human community mirrors communion through its mutual relationships.

Gilbert Bilezikian expresses Volf’s complex ideas about the Trinity in a simplified form in *Community 101*.¹³ Using Volf’s work, Bilezikian describes Trinity as “the original community of oneness”.¹⁴ Bilezikian identifies community as God’s gift to humanity, for “God is a divine community of oneness, who creates a human community of oneness as his supreme achievement.”¹⁵ By creating humans in His own image, one of “Tri-unity”, he has embedded into humanity the blueprint for true and authentic community. Being endowed with this same oneness, humanity can experience community just as that which is deeply grounded in the very nature of God. Bilezikian takes this concept of oneness as central to understanding what community is. Pointing to Christ’s prayer in the garden (John 17.21 and 22) he states “Christ desired that his church would be the earthly community of oneness modelled after the eternal community of oneness”.

Bilezikian’s study focuses on two images of community: the bride of Christ (II Corinthians 11.2) and the city, New Jerusalem (Rev. 21.2), both emphasising the oneness of the Trinity, that “all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17.21). The bride of Christ and marriage image is of particular use here in that it focuses on people and relationships, while the city image evokes a more institutional and structural view. For Bilezikian seeing the Church as bride means it is the “basic community of earth...that man and woman bonded in oneness...reflects the reality of the ultimate community in heaven, the

¹⁰ Volf, p. 205.

¹¹ Volf, p. 219.

¹² Volf, p. 219.

¹³ Volf mentions this text in his introduction and while saying it is more lay person oriented and lacking in some theological points he sees it as offering a valuable interaction between theological vision and practice.

¹⁴ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), p. 16.

¹⁵ Bilezikian, p. 22.

glorified Church united with the Saviour”.¹⁶ The Church is the bride, “the wife of the Lamb” (Rev. 21.9), Christ’s treasured possession. The formation of community is not an after thought in creation; it is its essence.

The first picture of community given in the Bible is that of Adam in his relationship to God. God has created man “in his own image”. One reading of this process of creation is that God desired to put within creation a picture of himself, yet without compromising his own divine nature. Bilezikian states, “God could not reproduce himself and create another God since he is absolute and, therefore, unique. But God did the next best thing. He created beings in his image”.¹⁷ God created man, a being in his own image, yet this solitary creation was not enough, and was even incomplete. In looking at man God stated “it is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Gen. 2.18).¹⁸ The creation of woman was to “help” man out of his aloneness. While man had relationship with the Divine, God recognised the need within man to experience connection on a human level, with one of his own kind. Since woman was “taken out of the man” (v. 22) who was created in the image of God, both were endowed with the likeness of the Divine. Each was unique, expressing the diversity of God. Their partnership offered an experiential dimension to the relationship of the Creator with His creation.

This first human community was a community of “one flesh” (v. 24), the first marriage of humankind.¹⁹ The relationship between man and woman was a God-created picture of union outside one’s self, two separate beings coming together to form one. It was also a relationship mirroring attributes of the divine community of the Trinity, the holy three-in-one. Thus the first community was to be a simplified expression of the interactions between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Built into this earthly marriage were promise and potential for union with a greater community in divine matrimony. “The goodness of the marriage relationship depicted in Genesis is an image of the true end of the human creature and the Creator.”²⁰ As will be

¹⁶ Bilezikian, p. 39.

¹⁷ Bilezikian, p. 19.

¹⁸ All Biblical citations taken from the *New International Version*.

¹⁹ Some would argue that marriage, in a temporal sense, should not be the basis for community. There are theological and pastoral ramifications for arguing marriage is normative and preferable to singleness. However these debates are beyond the scope of this thesis. The point being emphasised here is that marriage offers a picture of commitment to relationship that can be linked to Trinitarian studies of community.

²⁰ Kevin Vanhoozer, ‘Human being, individual and social’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. by Colin Gunton (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 167.

shown later, the image of marriage and the bride and groom relationship become a way to comprehend relationships within community, as well as God's destiny for humankind and the ultimate telos of community itself.

Community is a foretaste of the "consummation" of the eschaton. It is the destiny towards which creation ultimately moves. Earlier the ideal community was shattered through the Fall. The division affected not only the communal relationship of Adam and Eve, but caused separation from their divine community. With separation came sadness for both parties, as God is seen in Genesis 3.9 walking through the garden calling "Where are you?" searching for the lost oneness. Sin also caused establishment of a hierarchy within the communal relationship as was said to the woman ... "your desire will be to your husband and he will rule over you" (Gen. 3. 16b). When in Revelation 22.17 "the Spirit and the Bride say come", it is a calling and a coming back to the closeness and marriage union, a community of oneness, with the heavenly bridegroom. One of the first and final images in the Biblical text for the concept of relationships is the picture of the marriage relationship. First it is the wedding of man to woman and then of the Church to Christ. The sharing of food that brought separation, Adam and Eve's sharing of the fruit brings reconciliation through the wedding supper of the Lamb.

The image of divine marriage was used by many Christian writers in the mystical tradition, such as Madame Guyon, to describe the ideal relationship of humanity to its creator.²¹ In the above discussion the central theme is the community of oneness as represented in the Trinity and image of marriage. The creation story demonstrated the Divine community's desire to make humankind in its own image, not only as individuals but to mirror their interconnection to one another. They saw it was "not good for man to be alone"²². Christian theology understands human community to be a mirror of divine community. As the Trinity derives its identity from its relationship, so is humanity to derive its identity from its relationships with others. This shows community involves individuals being inextricably connected to others of their own kind; community is about the formation of relationships.

²¹ Numerous Christian mystics wrote commentaries on the Song of Songs, focusing on the image of marriage to explain the ultimate relationship between creation and its Creator. They often emphasised marriage as the primary way to understand humanity's ultimate destiny in the consummation. Consult: Jeanne Guyon, *Song of the Bride* (Jacksonville, FL: Christian Publishing House, 1990); St. John of the Cross, *A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom of Christ* (Kessinger Publishing Company, 1997) and Jeanne Guyon, *Experiencing The Depths Of Jesus Christ* (Jacksonville, FL: Christian Publishing House, 1975)

²² Genesis 2.18

DEFINITIONS OF CHURCH AND COMMUNITY: *EKKLESIA* AND *KOINONIA*

Having presented several images illustrating Biblical understandings of community, it becomes useful to turn to the language of community in the Bible. This involves looking at the words *ekklesia* and *koinonia*.²³ *Ekklesia*, a Greek word meaning “assembly or congregation”, is linked to the word “church”.²⁴ *Koinonia*, a Greek word meaning “communion, or fellowship”, is associated with the word “community”.²⁵ These words are used to identify the relationship and understanding of “church” and “community” in the Bible. Yet before the relationship of these words can be discussed, how they are defined in the Biblical context must be addressed.

The word “church” is often linked to the Greek word ἐκκλησία, which means “assembly” and suggests the idea of gathering together.²⁶ According to *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, *ekklesia* can be understood as “assembly, meeting or congregation”.²⁷ In a secular sense it is used to characterise a political phenomenon, such as the gathering of a guild or an army. *Ekklesia* is a New Testament term used often by Paul in such expressions as the “*ekklesia* of Christ” (I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 and Colossians 1.17) and also in Revelation, such as referring to the “*ekklesia* of Ephesus” (Revelation 2:1).²⁸ Peter Hodgson in *Revisioning the Church: Ecclesial Freedom in the New Paradigm*, describes the New Testament use of *ekklesia* as “the standard designation of the Christian movement, referring either to the movement as a whole or to its local assemblies and requiring theological elaboration through other terms”.²⁹ Though how and when the word *ekklesia* has been used in the Biblical text can be debated, Hodgson asserts, “one can say with certainty that all the early Christian writers use *ekklesia* only for those fellowships

²³ It should be noted that a predominately, but not exclusively, Pauline focus is being taken here in looking at the ideas of *ekklesia* and *koinonia*. This is not to say that these words or ideas are not resonating in the Gospels or other parts of the Bible. However, it can be argued, Paul is the New Testament writer who utilises these terms and ideas the most in his writings.

²⁴ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1975), p. 291.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 639.

²⁶ Understanding of *ekklesia* gathered from: Peter Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church. Ecclesial Freedom in the New Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 24-28.

²⁷ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, p. 291.

²⁸ In relation to the Old Testament, it should be noted that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, used *ekklesia* to translate the word *qahal* or the expression *qahal Yahweh* meaning “those called of God” or “the people or congregation of God”. *Qahal* also was translated as *synagoge* meaning “a gathering together” and is the basis for the word *synagogue* used to describe the gathering place of Jewish believers. Consult: Hodgson, pp. 24-28 and Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, translated by John P Galvin (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 77. From this can be seen the link of how the word “church” has come to mean both church as a local grouping and the Church as a corporate institution.

²⁹ Hodgson, p. 26.

which come into being after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus”.³⁰ In this understanding Paul does not limit *ekklesia* to an event or gathering; he goes on to describe the relationships or nature of the gathering as one whose origins lie with God and “can only be understood in relation to the Lord.”³¹ *Ekklesia* has a particular form to it, as Paul uses images of the body and building a house to speak of the coming together of believers. Yet he sees this form as secondary to its purpose, being a group called together for community life with its orderly formation allowing for spiritual gifts to develop and grow within community. To Paul the church is a living, assembled congregation, with a local emphasis, more than it is a rigid overarching structure. *Ekklesia* as the church is seen as an assembly for God, created by Him.

The word often associated with “community” is *koinonia*. In the Greek New Testament *κοινωνία* means “fellowship.” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, describes it as “association, communion, fellowship, participation.”³² It also states that the Hellenistic world *koinonia* meant “unbroken fellowship between the gods and men” and so stood for a “sense of brotherhood.”³³ In the Greek Old Testament it appears exclusively in later writing such as Ecclesiastes (9.4) and Proverbs (21.9), usually connected to the Hebrew root *habar*, which means to unite or join together. In the New Testament it is one of the four basic ingredients of worship in the early Christian church as stated in Acts 2:42. *Koinonia* is likened to the idea of sharing and denotes a “group of people closely bound together by what they share”, whether it is their food or their words.³⁴ This is also seen in Acts 4.32 as the communal sharing of goods, practised by the early church. Again Paul places significance on this word, “never using it in a secular sense but always in a religious one” to deal with ideas of fellowship with the Holy Spirit (II Cor. 13.13) or believers in the gospel (Phil. 1.5).³⁵ Hodgson points out that while most people conceive of *koinonia* as referring to the fellowship or sharing of faith, this use appears only once in the New Testament (“the fellowship of faith”—Philemon 6). For Hodgson “*koinonia* is a matrix in which faith occurs.”³⁶ Like Paul, he bases *koinonia* on fellowship with Christ and an understanding of the faithfulness of God. Only through this understanding (such as in I Cor. 1:9—“called into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ”) can a community of faith, hope and

³⁰ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, p. 298.

³¹ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, p. 299.

³² *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, p. 639.

³³ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, pp. 291-2.

³⁴ Howard Snyder, *Liberating the Church, The Ecology of the Church and the Kingdom* (Basingstoke, UK: Marshall Paperbacks, 1983), p. 79.

³⁵ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, p. 643.

³⁶ Hodgson, p. 32.

love be experienced together. *Koinonia*, as community, is focused around the idea of fellowship between believers only when it is within the community. Christ is the enabler; the communion is in him.

While the word *ekklesia* is often associated with the concept of church and *koinonia* with the word community, this does not yield a clear understanding of the link between church and community in the Biblical text. No direct links are made in the biblical text between these two words, either equating or comparing them. As their definitions show, each focuses on different ideas; *ekklesia* speaks of who is gathered and how, while *koinonia* addresses the nature or purposes of these associations. This makes linking the two through their definitions problematic, as *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* claims: “It (*koinonia*) is not a parallel to *ekklesia* and has nothing to do with local congregations.”³⁷ Therefore it is necessary not only to define these words, but explicate ideas they represent in order to uncover how they relate.³⁸

A link between the ideas of community and church can be found by looking at them as acts (assembly) and states (fellowship) of a specific group rather than as full descriptions of what a church or community is. This can be done by considering Biblical images utilised as conceptual pictures of how the communal nature of man relates to the divine community.³⁹ One New Testament image resonating with the understanding of both church (*ekklesia*) and community (*koinonia*) is that of communion. Communion offers a picture of the “Last Supper”, a physical act of communal sharing of food and fellowship as well as a symbolic and prophetic story. *Ekklesia* contains the idea of gathering together and the act of integration with another person or group, not just through being in the same place at the same time, but also through giving part of oneself to others. *Koinonia* contains the idea of sharing for a purpose. The sacramental act of communion embodies a two-fold sharing, of the bread and the wine with other believers, and symbolically sharing in Christ’s death through partaking of the symbols of His body and blood.

³⁷ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, p. 643.

³⁸ Paul Hanson asserts the word study approach alone is inadequate to explain and understand the biblical concept of community, as “much of the information found in the Bible regarding community is not found in association with specific words for community.” Consult: Paul Hanson, *The People Called. The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), p. 7.

³⁹ In the Old Testament looking at community means focusing on the nation of Israel where community and the church could be seen as one and the same. In the New Testament, the church is a specific group, believers in Christ. The church represents those called out of the greater human community into fellowship with God. While some images of community are found both in the Old and New Testament, such as being a branch (Romans 11:17-21 and Isaiah 4. 2) or sheep (John 21:15 and Ezekiel 34), there is a distinction between who and what is part of the community being referred to.

While *ekklesia* has structural connotations and *koinonia* has a relational focus, both stress it is Christ and His relationship with God which gives the groupings purpose. Thus, the church can be seen as a community of communion, a place of gathering and sharing with one another and with the mystery of Christ. This is illustrated in the final report of the 1982 Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, as Hill explains,

*In the early Christian tradition reflection of the experience of koinonia opened the way to understand the mystery of the Church. Although koinonia is never equated with 'Church' in the New Testament, it is the term that most aptly expresses the mystery underlying the various images of the Church.*⁴⁰

Communion provides an image of sharing in the mystery and both *koinonia* and *ekklesia* possess within them ideas resonating with the concept of communion. Communion is both a symbolic and liturgical action (the sacrament of communion) which seems to relate to the image of *ekklesia* as an action or the symbolic gathering of God's people. It is also a state of existence (people coming together for a common purpose) similar to the idea of *koinonia* where people find fellowship together. The image of communion also resonates with the previously discussed image of marriage, sharing in the life of another with the hope and promise of union. By eating Christ's flesh, believers become one with him, just as two are made one in the marriage union. Thus, belief and shared communion bring individuals into a family relationship. The *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* defines church in the sense of *ekklesia* as,

*Thought of as 'Christian community' because the early Christians were one in understanding what while men and women individually came to faith in Christ this involved by definition becoming part of the family of God.*⁴¹

Communion refers to an act providing a way to understand church as community, focusing attention on the act of sharing that creates connection with God and other believers.

The church as community is also about the state of the relationships existing when the people gather. As was previously mentioned linking *koinonia* and *ekklesia* can be related to the state of a specific group or how they assemble. Two related images utilised by theologians and Biblical writers to describe how the church is a community are "Body of Christ" and the

⁴⁰ Charles Hill, *Making Sense of Faith. An Introduction to Theology* (Alexandria, Australia: Dwyer Pty, 1995), p. 101.

⁴¹ Definition of "Church" found in: Ralph Martin and Peter Davids, eds. *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 195.

“People of God”. These images are commonly used to describe how individuals are seen to relate to each other and God. Thus a brief explanation is necessary for unpacking the key points of each.

The “Body of Christ” is seen as an organic image focusing on the analogy of the church as a human body with various parts both connected and interdependent. This image expressed by Paul in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12, stresses the mutual dependence of believers and the headship of Christ who leads the body. Each part performs a certain function, which ultimately affects all other aspects of the body. In Greek, “Body of Christ” is translated *soma tou Christou*, which contains the idea of a bond of union to Christ and others.⁴²

Hodgson, in *Revisoning the Church* describes this Pauline image as having three levels of meaning: first, self sacrifice for others—the crucified Christ; second, constitution of a new people—the risen Christ and thirdly, constitution of a new Humanity—the cosmic Christ.⁴³

In the 20th Century the image of the church as members of a body connected to each other has been used to describe of the way the church is and how it should function. Bonhoeffer wrote in his Doctoral work *Sanctorum Communio*, “the organism of the community is the function of the Spirit of Christ, that is, it is the body of Christ...the body as a collective person.”⁴⁴

The “People of God” can be seen as representing a more fluid image. In the Old Testament it is an image connected with Israel having national, ethnic and political connotations. Israel is referred to as people with God’s exclusive favour and choosing. In *People of God: A Plea for the Church*, Anton Houtepen highlights three components of this image: a people 1) chosen by God, 2) called to be a special people, and 3) gathered together for God’s purposes.⁴⁵ In the New Testament the “People of God” seems to be modified : “A people without national boundaries, a common language or a single ethnic identity is a peculiar sort of people. It is an ecclesia”.⁴⁶ In Greek “People of God” is translated, *ekklesia tou Theou*, which contains the idea of a “new people” called out of a great mass by a God active in history.⁴⁷ Gerard Lohfink in *Jesus and Community* states the early Christian community in Jerusalem called itself the “*ekklesia* of God”, seeing themselves as set apart to be brought

⁴² Hodgson , p. 30.

⁴³ Hodgson, p. 30.

⁴⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church* (London: Collins, 1963), p. 102. For a more popularised contemporary conception of the Church as the body consider Charles Colson, *The Body* (Nashville, TN: Word Books, 1994).

⁴⁵ Anton Houtepen, *People of God: A Plea for the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1984), p. 185.

⁴⁶ Hodgson, p. 29.

⁴⁷ Houtepen, p. ix.

together,⁴⁸ a group called to form a particular type of gathering (I Cor. 15:19 and Gal. 1:13). When “People of God” is applied to the church it represents a chosen people, selected by God. Lewis Mudge in *The Sense of a People* uses the People of God as a central model for developing a theology of the universal human community offering Revelation 21:3⁴⁹ as a starting point. For Mudge it is the “company of human beings which at any given moment and in any particular circumstances anticipates the vision of Rev. 21:3 by embodying the gathering, shaping energy of the Holy Spirit in history.”⁵⁰ Thus, this image encompasses the “whole communal reality” of human kind “generated in the world by God’s presence”.⁵¹

Both of these images emphasise and illustrate how relational connections are made and form a church into a community. The image of communion highlights actions taken by the church helping create community connections. From this discussion church (*ekklesia*) and community (*koinonia*) can be used to highlight the relational structure of Christian community, interdependence and connection of members to each other and God through the sharing of actions and a common call. These theological images and language offer ideals of how community is thought to exist. Yet, they do not fully explain how church as community actually functions. Next several models of the church describing how particular church communities conceive of their mission and function are presented.

FOUR MODELS OF THE CHURCH

To this point the discussion has focused on language and images used to conceptualise Christian community. Yet, to further unpack traditional theological understandings of community it is important to also consider several models used to describe the function of church. A model provides not only a conceptual picture of an idea, but a structure or map with which to trace multiple aspects of that idea. “Whereas images and symbols constitute the more immediate language of faith, the term model refers to a theoretical construct that is employed to deepen our understanding of a complex reality.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, translated by John P Galvin (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 77.

⁴⁹ “Now the dwelling place of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” (Revelation 21:3, NIV)

⁵⁰ Lewis Mudge, *The Sense of a People. Towards A Church for the Human Future* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1992), p. 10.

⁵¹ Mudge, p. 30.

⁵² Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1991), p. 192.

Numerous theologians have outlined various models of the church. One widely quoted text is Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church* in which he presents five models describing the church as an institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald and servant. Dulles' conviction is that the Church, like other theological realities, is a mystery. By this he means the Church contains "realities of which we cannot speak directly".⁵³ To discuss what the Church is requires looking at analogies speaking of how the mysteries of the Church (grace, redemption, the Holy Spirit) are manifested and experienced in the world. Such analogies provide a basis for different models; each is a different way to conceive of the role and purpose of the Church.

Dulles' models provide a clear presentation of some of the dominant ways certain church communities' function. The model *Church as Institution* depicts "church as society"; because of this the Church needs some form of institution to function in society.⁵⁴ *Church as Mystical Communion* points to the Church as having both horizontal, social relationships of communion with others, and vertical, mysterious relationships with God. The *Church as Sacrament* model focuses on Christ as God's sacramental gift of grace to the world. The Church becomes a sign to the world of this gift of grace through such symbols as Eucharist and baptism. The *Church as Herald* model emphasises the "word" first and sacrament as secondary. In this model Church is the congregation gathered around the word, receiving the official message from God and responsible to pass it on. The model of *Church as Servant* causes the Church to identify with Christ as suffering servant, and become a place of healing to be the "community for others."⁵⁵ Each of these models highlights different perspectives and attributes of the Church.

For this research project four of these models are explored, serving as tools to describe specific online and real world church communities featured in this study. Dulles' models of Church as mystical communion, sacrament, herald and servant are described, critiqued and followed by a brief discussion of how each model can be linked to a specific "real world" church community.⁵⁶

⁵³ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 7.

⁵⁴ Dulles, p. 31.

⁵⁵ Dulles, p. 86.

⁵⁶ The Church as Institution model is not used because it does not apply to the specific examples of online communities in this study.

CHURCH AS MYSTICAL COMMUNION

The *Church as Mystical Communion* focuses on a human community that is unique because God is present in it. This community is not just a human grouping of relationships; it is a relationship, a divine union of God and man.⁵⁷ In this union lies the mystery, of Christ in the Church and the Church in him (Col. 1:2). As Paul writes in Ephesians 5: 30, 31b-32 (NIV) “We are members of his body...and the two become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church”. This mystery is also “multidimensioned”; it is divine plan encompassing historical, cosmic, personal and Biblical dimensions open to all who choose to believe. (Eph 3: 9-10, NIV)⁵⁸

In his chapter *Church as Mystical Communion*, Dulles brings together the notion of communion (linking it to *koinonia*) with the idea that the nature of the Church is mystical, brought about through the Holy Spirit. This is an inter-personal model stressing the horizontal dimension of personal relationships between the individual and the collective, and the vertical dimension of relationship linked through the Holy Spirit. The notion of Church as a community or communion is not that of an institution or visibly organised society, but of “a communion of men, primarily interior but also expressed by external bonds of creed, worship and ecclesiastical fellowship”.⁵⁹ This model is helpful in that it addresses issues of the Church visible and invisible; the Church is visible through its connection to each other and invisible in its connection through the Spirit to God.

However, to speak of the Church as a mystery or mystical is problematic. The very idea of the word “mysterious” or “mystical” means something that cannot fully be comprehended with the physical senses. This suggests a model knowable only through divine revelation. Daniel Migliore re-presents Dulles’s model as an “intimate community of the Spirit”, where the Church is “a closely knit group whose members share a common experience of God’s revivifying Spirit.”⁶⁰ This model centres on the idea of communion through support and fellowship. Again, the institution of the Church is de-emphasised and the individual is emphasised. The main task of the Church is thus to facilitate spiritual experiences and promote interpersonal relationships.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Idea taken from Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1974)

⁵⁸ Hill, p. 99.

⁵⁹ Dulles, p. 51.

⁶⁰ Migliore, p. 194.

⁶¹ Migliore, p. 194.

In practice such a community might focus on prayer, spiritual exercises and sharing of experiences in which individual growth is encouraged in the context of the community. This model can be seen being lived out in the Charismatic Movement and Pentecostal denominations, which emphasise the gifts of the Spirit and special experiences such as healing and the “baptism” of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, individual experiences of the Spirit create a common language and bond for such an intimate community. Many people who are physically or spiritually broken find these communities places of healing and acceptance. One weakness of this model is its emphasis on ecstatic intimate experiences which can produce an inward focus for individual and group. As Migliore states, “While the church indeed is the community of the Spirit in which all have gifts and in which power is shared, the New Testament views this new ‘Spirit-guided’ community as called to serve God’s purpose of both personal and world transformation.”⁶²

CHURCH AS SACRAMENT

The *Church as Sacrament* interprets the Church as a symbolic community because the structure of human life is seen as symbolic.⁶³ The human body holds the Spirit, thus facilitating the Spirit’s interaction with the world. This means the body gives tangible form and expression to the spirit. It is understood that God was given symbolic expression through the person of Jesus Christ, enabling Him to become visible or tangible in the world. Jesus Christ is referred to as a “sacrament of God”, a symbol representing God and also a sign pointing to the Godhead. Following this the Church is said to be the “sacrament of Christ” by functioning as a symbol representing Jesus and making him present in the world.

Dulles defines sacrament as “a socially constituted or communal symbol of the presence of grace coming to fulfilment”.⁶⁴ Thus, sacrament is never solely an individual transaction; it takes place in a community context. Sacrament involves action; it is not merely an image such as a religious icon or a cross, but is an act of celebration such as Baptism or the Eucharist. Thus, sacrament has an “event character” and is “dynamic” through the grace of Christ present within. Dulles argues the “Church becomes the Church insofar as the grace of Christ, operative within it, achieves historical tangibility through the actions of the church”.⁶⁵ Without this grace sacrament easily becomes lifeless, empty ritual. Whenever the church

⁶² Migliore, p. 194.

⁶³ Dulles, p. 60.

⁶⁴ Dulles, p. 62.

⁶⁵ Dulles, p. 64.

meets it is to become an “event of grace” as the virtues and presence of Christ can together transform lives. Therefore, this model focuses on the communal gathering and celebration of sacrament as an act of grace. The focus is not only on the visible Church but the invisible working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the community.

Migliore calls this model the “sacrament of salvation” emphasising through worship, witness and service “the church is the sign of the continuing presence of the grace of God in Jesus Christ in history”.⁶⁶ The sacramental model has been more clearly explicated in the Catholic Church, especially since Vatican II, and it is also seen in the Anglican Communion. In practice, worship takes on a liturgical nature, services containing numerous symbolic elements such as icons, incense, candles, written and repeated prayers and sung or said responses to intonations made by the officiating priest. Symbols draw attention of individuals to the church’s own sacramental life, specifically the Eucharist. Emphasis is on corporate participation in sacramental acts allowing them to become events of grace through the mysteries of the Spirit. Doctrines and beliefs such as transubstantiation, the actual embodiment of Christ in the communion wafer, add to their significance as dramatisations in which Christ becomes visible to the community of faith.

As has been discussed, *Church as Sacrament* centres on the idea of symbolic ritual. One weakness of this model is its tendency to draw attention to the worship service or structure of the Church, focusing the community on the external expressions. It also tends to imply a rigid structure, which in actuality is not transferable to some cultural expressions of Christian community. Migliore also notes the tendency of this model to lean toward “ecclesiocentrism, often in the form of liturgism”.⁶⁷

CHURCH AS HERALD

The *Church as Herald* is a community of the “word”; the Church is a congregation gathered around the word. The “word” refers to the word of God, the Bible. Its message is very Christocentric as the Bible is seen as the testimony pointing to the person of Jesus Christ. The Church becomes the place where Christ is present when the word is preached. Thus, the community mission is proclamation of the word. Dulles describes this role of herald as “one who receives an official message with the commission to pass it on”; this is the picture of a

⁶⁶ Migliore, p. 195.

⁶⁷ Migliore, p. 195.

“herald of a king who comes to proclaim a royal decree in the public square.”⁶⁸ The herald speaks the word because of the commission given by a higher authority; he is a messenger.

In this way “language has an assembling function”.⁶⁹ Community is constituted through the linguistic event of proclamation. At each act of speaking the word, Church is constituted. It is the preaching of the word that brings the community together. Another significant trait in this model is its evangelistic and missionary thrust deriving from the “Great Commission” to “go and make disciples of all nations...” (Matt. 28.18b). It is understood only God can produce conversions, but the role of the Church is to spread the gospel and the message of salvation, encouraging individuals to put their faith in Jesus Christ.

This model typically has a congregational focus. Identifying it as “herald of good news”, Migliore sees institutional structures and connections as subordinate to the task of evangelisation.⁷⁰ Unity within the greater Church is found when all are preaching and responding to the same gospel, that is connecting through a common task. In practice this model is focused around speaking about the Biblical text and its public proclamation. Worship services are focused around sermons or times of preaching. Activities outside the communal service are often focused around proselytising and public sharing of the “gospel.” This model is most readily seen in Protestant churches, especially those with an evangelical emphasis. During the time of the Reformation the emphasis on the sacraments shifted and the “visible” word through the “proclamation of the Christ event” took precedence.⁷¹

A notable weakness of the model *Church as Herald* is it highlights a single action of the Church. This exclusive view of the Church’s function in greater society often misses the holistic call to care for other human needs as well such as food, shelter, and health care. Migliore describes this danger occurring when the Church “speaks and never listens.”⁷² If not monitored it can also produce a self-righteous attitude towards those individuals with whom the word is being shared. Finally, while addressing how it should relate to the world, the model does not address how the Church should function as a community or congregation, so the task of “doing” overrides the call to “be” the Church, the manifestation of Christ in the world.

⁶⁸ Dulles, p. 71.

⁶⁹ Dulles, p. 76.

⁷⁰ Migliore, p. 196.

⁷¹ Dulles, p. 77.

⁷² Migliore, p. 196.

CHURCH AS SERVANT

The *Church as Servant* is the “church for others.” Central to this model is the image of Christ as suffering servant: he was a “man for others”, so the church community is called to be individuals who will stand along side Jesus in service to others.⁷³ According to Dulles, to be a servant denotes three things about one’s work: it is done under orders and not free choice, it is for the direct good of others and not self, and it is humble and demeaning.⁷⁴ While this interpretation seems to lack direct foundation in the Bible, Dulles points its “indirect foundation” in the servant songs of Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoner...” (Is. 61.1) Thus, the servant is dedicated to transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God.

A key underpinning of this model is a belief that to be of true service the Church should act within societal structures rather than build complimentary structures. This is encapsulated by seeing the Church as existing not for itself, but for the world. As Bonhoeffer stated, “The Church is the Church only when it exists for others...The Church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving”.⁷⁵ In this, the mission of the Church becomes not to “gain new recruits” but to “be able to help all men, wherever they are”.⁷⁶ The *Church as Servant* is dedicated to the task of transforming the world into the Kingdom of God.

Migliore clarifies Dulles’ model as a call to be a “servant of the servant Lord” where “the church is servant-community called to minister in God’s name on behalf of fullness of life for all God’s creatures”.⁷⁷ With this model comes a call to work in the struggle for liberation of the oppressed. Some view this as most fully lived out by those churches, especially Catholic, which subscribe to liberation theology and are involved in Christian Base communities. Within Protestantism communities such as the Presbyterian Church (USA) which place emphasis on the “ministry of reconciliation” also subscribe to this model. Emphasis is placed on service as a duty and calling as well as an act of worship. Communal living and communitarian ethics are often emphasised in daily life in this model, where both

⁷³ Dulles, p. 86.

⁷⁴ Dulles, pp. 92-93.

⁷⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), p. 55.

⁷⁶ Dulles, p. 91.

⁷⁷ Migliore, p. 196.

prayer and work become expressions of prophetic action, working on behalf of those in need of freedom and justice.

The *Church as Servant*, while helpful in presenting the attitude and role those in the church community should take within the greater society, is in its essence idealistic. It focuses on the goal of how Church should be, and does not present grounds for understanding how Church actually functions in the western world. It could be argued the New Testament emphasis on service seems to be on building the Kingdom of God rather than on the temporal order which the model suggests.

SUMMARY

This section has explored images, definitions and models utilised in constructing a theological understanding of community. The Church represents a unique community, ordained and gathered by God. While issues of community structure have been discussed, the aim has been to focus on theological conceptions of relationships within the Church. The Biblical images of marriage and Trinity have been presented to show how community is seen as a relationship of interdependence created to reflect the relationship of Creator to creation and the relationship of the Trinity to itself. The Greek terms *ekklesia* and *koinonia* have been defined and related to the idea of church as community through the images of communion, the Body of the Christ and the People of God. These illustrate how the Church's common call (gathered by God) forms community connections, and the community's action related to those connections influences how they assemble and relate as the Church. The four models offer different perspectives of how various churches function as communities highlighting distinct theological ideals central to particular communities and how these ideas dictate ways in which they structure their communal practices and worship.

Exploration of all these components highlights a theological approach to community emphasising a relational focus that is flexible and dynamic, while maintaining bonds of commitment through communion with one another and the Divine. Individual identity is rooted in its connection to others. This shows within theology there are images and definitions that support the conception of community not bounded by static structures, but emphasising interpersonal relationships that are changeable. It has also been important to describe these particular images and language here as they are utilised in other chapters as descriptive phrases relating to individual experience and understanding of Christian

community. These four models will be used as tools in the case study chapter to describe real life structures of church communities and evaluate how these models inform and affect online Christian communities.

COMMUNITY FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Theologians provide a distinct perspective on community, from the eyes of faith. Its foremost concern is with meaning and foundations of community: for what purpose does community exist? It emphasises models and images that serve as ideals of how community can and should function. In sociology the focus shifts from the grounding of belief and destiny of the group to explaining and defining the social relationships which categorise community. Theologians illuminate why and how specific church communities gather, yet it often does not explain the inner workings within a community, specifically how individuals interact and gather. Thus, it is important to turn to sociology to help more fully explain aspects of social relationships. Community from a sociological perspective offers an alternative picture of how relationships within a community actually exist and can be described.

This section seeks to provide a picture of how sociology has addressed the subject of community, focusing on explaining how groups of individuals understand their associations in a communal context. It begins with a general overview highlighting key ideas emerging in the development of a sociological understanding of community. Next, a particular study method, Social Network Analysis, is considered as a relevant approach to this study for understanding communal relationships. The purpose is to describe how sociology characterises the ways people live and relate to each other in communal relationships in order to identify key components useful to define community in relation to this thesis.

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY STUDIES AND THE “COMMUNITY QUESTION”

In sociology, the concept of “community” emerged as a way to understand societal organisations and relationships. In sociology numerous definitions of the word “community” exist, yet according to Bell and Newby the only fundamental element these definitions have in common is they deal with people; beyond this “there is no agreement.”⁷⁸ In the search for a definition within the area of community studies, Barry Wellman argues the basic question

⁷⁸ Colin Bell and Howard Newby, *Community Studies* (London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1971), p. 27.

has been “how the large-scale structures of social systems reciprocally affect the small-scale structures and contents of interpersonal relationships within them.”⁷⁹ It is the small-scale structures that are referred to as communities.

One of the ways sociologists have tried to understand community is to study changes occurring within society, in particular what has been called the “loss of community” coming about during transitions from a “traditional” to a “modern” society. That is, the move from a rural to an urban society. Modernity emerged as civilisation embraced the Industrial Revolution and the “Age of Enlightenment”. The “modern” mindset emphasised progress and rejected “traditional” ideas and ways of doing which were thought to hinder personal and societal advancement. Middleton and Walsh described modern individuals as, “Autonomous subjects, scientifically grasping and technologically controlling and transforming the world, unimpeded by threats such as traditional ignorance and superstitions, [who] devise their own remedy”.⁸⁰

In many ways, argues Andre Lemos, “community” was a creation of modernity, an entity separate from society only when new forms of social organisation began to arise. From the 16th to the 18th centuries the theory of society surrounding social thought was based on the idea of the “project of society.” Corporations, families and guilds were all combined as one grouping.⁸¹ Use of the concept of “community” possibly arose in an attempt to move away from this idea of the project of society and point towards a “social collective” possessing the following attributes: a common project, institutionalisation, appearance of proximity, a physical territory, and forms of direct or un-mediated communication.⁸² The idea of creating and maintaining a community thus became a worthwhile and achievable ideal.

Another sociological understanding of community is rooted in the three elements of territory, social system and sense of belonging.⁸³ Community is often used to describe a locality, a “given geographical area as a basis of social organisation.”⁸⁴ It may refer to a “local social

⁷⁹ Barry Wellman, ‘The Community Question Revisited’, in *Power, Community and the City. Comparative Urban Research*, 1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1988), p. 82.

⁸⁰ Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be* (London: SPCK, 1995), p. 20.

⁸¹ Andre Lemos, ‘The Labyrinth of Mintel’, in *Cultures of the Internet*, ed. by Rod Shields (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 43.

⁸² Lemos, p. 43.

⁸³ Margaret Stacey, ‘The Myth of Community Studies’, in *The Sociology of Community*, ed. by C. Bell & H. Newbys (London: Franks Cass, 1974), pp. 13-26.

⁸⁴ Mike O’Donnell, *A New Introduction to Sociology*, 2nd edn. (Surrey: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1987), p. 130.

system or set of relationships that centre upon a given locality.”⁸⁵ Also it can be used to describe a “type of relationship,” often referring to a shared identity of a given group of people.⁸⁶ Often notions of social system and senses of belonging are bound by the idea of the territory within which they could be contained.

Central to the development of this understanding of community is the work of Ferdinand Tonnies, particularly his classic 19th century book *Community and Association* (*Gemeinschaft und Gessellschaft*). Tonnies uses these terms to distinguish between changes in social relations occurring in the move from traditional rural communities to modern urban centres. *Gemeinschaft* means community, or “all kinds of association in which natural will predominates”, while *Gessellschaft* refers to society or associations “formed and fundamentally conditioned by rational will”.⁸⁷ These two terms of distinction refer not to social entities or groups, but they denote a distinction between the rational and natural will of the individual involved. For Tonnies, all social relationships are created by an act of human will. Social relationships exist through the will of individuals to associate together. Natural will (*Wesenwille*) refers to that which is part of general human volition, “not only what he has learned but also the inherited mode of thought and perception of the forefathers influence his sentiment, his mind and heart, his conscience.”⁸⁸ In contrast the rational will (*Kurwille*) is where “the thinking has gained predominance and come to be the directing agent”.⁸⁹ In Tonnies’ thinking, *Gemeinschaft* relationships involve the whole person, as in rural life, which he saw requiring people to interact more fully with each other. *Gessellschaft* relationships were exemplified in the urban setting where associations or transactions occur for practical purposes with little informal contact. Tonnies’ distinction reflects changes he saw occurring within society “from the moral/emotional quality of traditional life to the practical/rational quality of modern life”.⁹⁰

In the 20th century Talcott Parsons also attempted to explain this distinction between traditional and modern life by developing a list of pattern variables used to contrast pairs of values and norms. Drawing from Durkheim’s mechanical-organic axis of comparison,

⁸⁵ O’Donnell, p. 130.

⁸⁶ O’Donnell, p. 130.

⁸⁷ Ferdinand Tonnies, *Community and Associations*, trans. by Charles Loomis (London: Routledge, 1955), p. 17.

⁸⁸ Tonnies, p. 15.

⁸⁹ Tonnies, p. 15.

⁹⁰ O’Donnell, p. 132.

Parsons presents five correlating variables in traditional and modern society.⁹¹ Coming from a functionalist perspective, which considers society to operate similarly to the functions of a biological organism, Parsons does recognise the overlap between these two types of societies. Modern society is seen as more rational and affectively neutral, but it does not always limit people into uncaring, non-feeling roles of interaction in what he refers to as the “cultural/community sub-system”.⁹²

This change within social relations and interactions can be especially noted in western society. Mass migrations from rural to urban areas, particularly during the Industrial Revolution, marked for many the beginning of an unravelling of the sense of community. Such was the case in America, when thousands of individuals traded their farms for crowded tenement houses in search of a new and better way of life. Neil Postman describes this as a technocracy, “a society only loosely controlled by social custom and religious tradition and driven by the impulse to invent”.⁹³ Migrants did not leave all their values and commitments to community behind, yet this new culture bred a disdain for tradition. Anything, including values, which could be tied to the tool-based culture from which they came, was considered out-dated and anti-modern. Tradition and technology existed together in uneasy alliance.

The twentieth century witnessed America progressing towards a totalitarian technocracy, what Postman calls a “technopoly” leading to “the success of technology and the devaluation of traditional beliefs.”⁹⁴ Old values, often relating to issues of faith and folk beliefs, were dissolved to make room for an alternative way of looking at the world. With this devaluation came emphasis on product over producer, reducing the value of humanity to its ability to interact with technology. The currency of the technological age is information. Many aspects of western culture have become information-driven; large segments of the job market involve manipulating information in some form or another. Information is a commodity. Computers and robots replace line workers in factories. Voice mail and answering machines

⁹¹ Within traditional society Tonnies notes the following five dominant characteristics as: ascription (status coming through birth), diffuseness (relationships are broad, community-like), particularism (people treat one another in a particular way), affectivity (emotions are expressed openly, publicly), and collective orientation (shared interests are important). He contrasts these with dominant traits found in modern society as: achievement (status based on personal efforts), specificity (relationships are for specific purposes), universalism (all laws apply to everyone), affective neutrality (emotions are controlled and closed) and self-orientation (individual interest is pursued first over family/community interests).

⁹² O'Donnell, p. 135.

⁹³ Neil Postman, *Technopoly* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 41.

⁹⁴ Postman, p. 53.

replace receptionists. Interaction between humans is becoming more indirect and mediated. All these factors have led to distancing humans from each other.

Referred to as “loss of community”, this thesis is often summed up by the simplified idea life was better “then” than it is “now.” Such a theory perpetuates a recurrent theme of conservative nostalgia that with modernity society has become depersonalised, and life within traditional societies produced “stronger”, “healthier” social relations. Although empirical data supports this assumption, it is a general oversimplification of the changes that have occurred within society. It disregards unpleasant characteristics of traditional society, such as structural oppression and disparity of wealth. As O’Donnell comments, “The model has no use for class or class conflict in the analysis of community life. It takes as a ‘given’ the capitalistic system instead of examining how this system shapes social life”.⁹⁵

The question of what constitutes a “community” can be quite problematic, so much so that Margaret Stacey suggests avoiding the term altogether. This would allow sociologists and researchers to move past conceptual disagreements of whether a community is a geographical area, a sense of belonging, or a relationship. Stacey’s own work looks at the concept of “local social system” as an alternative way to speak of community.⁹⁶

In order to cope with the subject of community many sociological studies have specialised in specific types of communities. The sociology of religion has focused on describing religious communities. Marx, Weber and Durkheim, classical thinkers in sociology, all gave significant consideration to religion’s influence within societal relationships.⁹⁷ Durkheim’s work exploring the connection between church and religion has been influential within this development of the sociology of religion. He offered specific insights about religious communities, seeing the communal quality of religion as essential. Durkheim stated religion provides cohesion by ensuring people gather together regularly to affirm common beliefs and values through particular practices or rituals. True religious beliefs bind together fellow believers giving birth to the idea of a church.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ O’Donnell, p. 141

⁹⁶ Bell and Newby, p. 49.

⁹⁷ Marx, a critic of religion, proclaimed religion was “opium of the people” and noted the strong ideological influence it has over the masses. Weber saw study of religion as important because of the role it plays in social change, in particular the emergence of capitalism.

⁹⁸ For more detailed discussion consult: W.S.F. Pickering, *Durkheim on Religion, A Selection of Reading with Bibliographies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 120-125.

Much of sociology of religion's study of Christianity has focused on the topic of church as a place where individuals who share common beliefs gather, in contrast with religious institutions seeking to organise and regulate these centres of belief. Studies in the 1940s and onwards often focused on the organisational and institutional side of religious communities, such as demographic survey studies of churches often trying to address the secularisation theory. In the 1960s and 1970s the field expanded to look at issues of new religious movements, where various new cults and sects set out to form communities of faith. Since the 1980s it has expanded to non-western religious communities, especially relating to the topic of globalisation and changes within larger social structures. Sociology of religion still tends to focus on describing the collective gatherings of people through religion relating to issues of the individual within society, societal legitimacy of religious practice, and social control of religion.

This brief overview illustrates the development of sociological study of community. Sociologists continue to look for different ways to study the community question. University of Toronto sociologist Barry Wellman notes dramatic changes in the approaches to the study of community since World War II. First, he sees "armchair theorising" being replaced by systematic efforts to analyse genuine data. Next, he notes new local social histories have helped to "demythologise notions of stable pastoral villages," leading to growth in neighbourhood studies. The shift toward structural analysis also opened up studies of family, household and urban settings as options to explore the idea of community. Thirdly, the emergence of "network analysis has freed the community question from its traditional preoccupation with solidarity and neighbourhood".⁹⁹ Methods such as "human ecology", communities as organisations, communities as microcosms, community study as a method, and the rural-urban dichotomy have also been employed.¹⁰⁰ One approach foundational to this study is Social Network Analysis addressing communities in terms of social interaction, emphasising personal connections or relationships created within them. Social Network Analysis is next explored in detail as it provides a strategic framework for explaining how communities, especially online communities, relate.

⁹⁹ Wellman, 'The Community Question Revisited', p. 83.

¹⁰⁰ For overview of these areas consult chapter two of Bell and Newby, *Community Studies* (London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1971).

SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

Social Network Analysis seeks to address the “privatisation of community.” Wellman argues urban sociological study has tended to focus on neighbourhood sociology, with large-scale social phenomena being overlooked in favour of the study of small-scale communities.¹⁰¹ In reality, modern urban dwellers tend to associate with several groupings rather than a single neighbourhood group. These networks are inter-connected through individuals whose ties vary in strength and intensity. Some networks are relied on for general-purposes (such as work associates) and others for specific-assistance (such as emergency services or a special interest club).

Social Network Analysis, emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s, argues that communities are in their essence social structures and not spatial structures. This approach identifies a set of nodes (which can be persons, organisations, etc.) and a set of ties which connect all or some of these nodes. Social structure is the “patterned organisation of these network members and their relationships”.¹⁰² In Social Network Analysis, social relationships that transcend groups are identified and used to describe underlying patterns of social structure. This approach has been used to study organisational, urban, rural and personal communities.¹⁰³

Using this approach, analysts deal with community as a “personal community,” a “network of significant, informal ‘community ties’ defined from a standpoint of a focal person”.¹⁰⁴ In modern society people are seen not wrapped in traditionally densely knit, tightly bound communities, but floating in sparse, loosely bound, frequently changing networks. Community ties are seen as narrow, specialised relationships. This is supported by the argument that communities have moved out of neighbourhoods to become dispersed networks that continue to be supportive and sociable.

Social Network Analysis moves towards a structural analysis, rather than an emphasis on the individual common within the social sciences. Relations and emerging patterns become the

¹⁰¹ Argument outline by Wellman in ‘Networks, Neighbourhoods and Communities. Approaches to the Study of the Community Question’, in *Urban Affairs Quarterly*. 14, 3 (March 1979), pp. 363-390.

¹⁰² Barry Wellman, ‘The Privatisation of Community: From Public Groups to Unbounded Networks’, (unpublished paper presented at ASA/ISA North American Conference, Toronto, 8 August 1997).

¹⁰³ For a survey of Social Network Analysis studies consult: Barry Wellman and Barry Leighton, , ‘Networks, Neighbourhoods and Communities. Approaches to the Study of the Community Question’, in *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 14. 3 (March 1979), pp. 363-390.

¹⁰⁴ Wellman, ‘The Community Question Revisited’, pp. 86-87.

focus of study. Wellman has spent over 20 years utilising Social Network Analysis and has pioneered its use in studying online communities. He states,

*When a computer network connects people it is a social network. Just as a computer network is a set of machines connected by a set of cables, a social network is a set of people (or organisation or other social networks) connected by a set of socially meaningful relationships.*¹⁰⁵

Wellman's current work focuses on how computer networks support a variety of social networks, which can be termed communities. Computer-mediated communication can support both tightly bound networks, such as an online group existing within a specific organisation sharing working information online, and loosely unbounded networks, such as informal email contacts' exchange of messages. Since computer networking is one of the many ways individuals in modern society maintain social relations, it can not be overlooked as a viable opportunity to study the existence of contemporary community.

He uses the term "computer-supported social networks" or "computer-assisted social networks" to describe activity existing within groups where the "computerised flow of information" comprises individuals' communication.¹⁰⁶ While information technology extends and redefines work and social relations, he argues it does not change the nature of community relations, which he sees as existing outside technology.

*Community ties are already geographically dispersed, sparsely knit, specialised in content and connected heavily by telecommunications (phone and fax). Although virtual communities may carry these trends a bit further, they also sustain in person encounters between community members.*¹⁰⁷

In this way the Internet supports what Wellman refers to as "glocalized" communities in which one's village can span the globe. "Glocalized" communities occur when "loosely-coupled global networks" intersect with "tightly bounded domestic networks resulting in the blurring of domestic and work-related spaces".¹⁰⁸ Thus, the Social Network Analysis view of community is a helpful way to approach not only new patterns of communication and

¹⁰⁵ Barry Wellman, 'An Electronic Group is Virtually A Social Network', in *Culture of the Internet*, ed. by Sara Kiesler (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997), p. 179.

¹⁰⁶ Barry Wellman, 'An Electronic Group is Virtually A Social Network', p. 198.

¹⁰⁷ Barry Wellman, 'An Electronic Group is Virtually A Social Network', p. 198..

¹⁰⁸ Barry Wellman, 'The Privatisation of Community: From Public Groups to Unbounded Networks', unpublished paper presented at ASA/ISA North American Conference, Toronto, 8 August 1997).

methods of interaction occurring within the online context, but also a method of viewing the evolution of community ties within society as a whole.

The task of Social Network Analysis is to “describe networks of relations as fully as possible, tease out prominent patterns in such networks, trace the flow of information through them and discover what effects these relations and networks have on people and organisation.”¹⁰⁹ Analysts can approach networks as “ego-centered” (personal) or whole networks (a given population) and seek to identify the range, centrality and roles of networks and their members. Just as social networks are individually unique and often fluid, so are social interactions that take place on the Internet, where individuals choose communities and create a web of connection. Social Network Analysis looks at how social connections overlap, form and change into a network of interactions.¹¹⁰

This form of analysis is helpful in understanding community because it provides a visual and conceptual model of community as network. The network approach, it is argued, facilitates a more accurate portrayal of how individuals form, sustain and operate in their social relations, than previous models offered by sociology (neighbourhoods, kinship groups, etc).

Community as network sits well with a sociological understanding of community based on flexible relationships. Within western urban society an image of community bound to relationships geographically, ethnically or culturally fixed does not always seem applicable. When technology mediates and sustains social relationships, geographical separation no longer becomes a factor for inclusion or exclusion within an individual or group’s social network. Ease of travel facilitates intermittent face-to-face contact with family or friends from which an individual is geographically separated. Television and computers allow individuals access to information on a global scale. The telephone is also used to maintain

¹⁰⁹ Laura Garton, Caroline Haythornthwaite and Barry Wellman, ‘Studying Online Social Networks’, at *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* (March 1997) accessed 12 February 1998 <<http://C/jcmc9/final/jcmcweb1.html>>

¹¹⁰ Practical application of Social Network Analysis is seen in studies such as the Toronto Wired Suburb (Hampton and Wellman, 1998) and the Cerise Research group (Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 1997) involving multiple personal and organisational relationships. Information is gathered through questionnaires, interviews, diaries and, in the case of online community studies, computer monitoring. Ideally all members of a given network are surveyed regarding their interactions with others. Questions typically focus on such issues as with whom individuals communicate, frequency of communication and methods, along with relational content of communications such as with whom members socialise. Then relationships are charted within the network, often with the help of a computer program. A matrix representing each relation or area of inquiry, portrays information flow or social connections made under a given topic. This can take the form of a map, called a sociogram, depicting network communication structure. Such diagrams help the researcher visually identify emerging clusters of social interaction. The study by Garton, Haythornthwaite and Wellman, “Studying Online Social Networks,” in the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, March 1997 provides a helpful breakdown in how social network analysis is applied within online research.

social relationships. Conversely, it is not uncommon for individuals to be socially separate from those with whom they live in close physical proximity, while claiming to have close social contact with those they see face-to-face only a few times a year.

SUMMARY

Though it is not the intent of this research to apply a strict Social Network Analysis to the communities under investigation, discussing this approach provides essential philosophical background influencing how community is being conceptualised. Community as network is a model easily applied to the Internet, the computer “network of networks.” The image of links in a community refers to links on the WWW of one web site to another, which join individuals and allow idea sharing in the form of hypertext. Email can facilitate social ties, which are self-regulated and spontaneous, similar to bumping into an acquaintance at the store or attempts to coordinate diaries for a coffee meeting. “Ties people develop online are much like their real-life ties: intermittent, specialised and varying in strength.”¹¹¹ Electronic communities are discussed more in-depth in chapter two. In the remainder of this chapter, focus is on linking the sociological and theological discussions of community through summarising the approach to community being taken in this project.

CONNECTING SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS WITH A THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITY

Having offered several theological and sociological readings of the concept of community, the challenge now is to consider how these two relate. The link being suggested is that both approaches can present community as a network of relationships. The descriptive language here is taken from Social Network Analysis (SNA), which has been shown to provide a unique approach to describe how social relationships are formed through relational networks. SNA views communal relationships as based on loosely bound relational networks, determined by social interaction and changes rather than rigid structural ties such as geography or culture. As a network, community has the ability to adapt easily to social changes, allowing individuals and group structure to be altered without severing ties with the larger community.

¹¹¹ Barry Wellman, Keith Hampton and Emanuel Koku. ‘Electronic Communities’ in *Encyclopedia of Psychology* (New York: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, 1998).

This flexibility is not antithetical to a theological understanding of community; indeed Social Network Analysis sits well with several theological images presented in this chapter. Trinity can be interpreted as a relationship network between the persons of the Godhead, its relationship to be mirrored in human community. Marriage is pictured as a network of interdependence linked to the divine community of oneness. The notion that church (*ekklesia*) is a type of community (*koinonia*) is understood through the shared image of communion; a symbolic act allowing individuals to connect with one another and Christ in this holy meal. Inherent in the idea of community as network is the notion of union; network facilitates interaction through connection not just with individuals but with a greater whole.

Other aspects of the theological discussion rest comfortably with SNA. It can relate to the “People of God” image, in which people see themselves as chosen by God to connect and form community, allowing members to move outside the community in order to bring others in. The “Body of Christ” image, while more tightly bound, illustrates interdependence as relational links between members affect the entire community. A SNA understanding of community also enables this study to offer different models of church to explain the functional nature of different Christian communities. Just as a network map (sociogram) will appear different depending on the node selected as the starting point, so each of the four models represent a distinct church relationship structure based on the central focal point of the given church community. SNA within this theological exploration focuses attention on relationships and social interaction within the community; the network describes how these are lived out and expressed by individuals and the community.

One tension in this discussion is that SNA seems to imply a set of free-form relationships constantly changing and resisting being tied down. Theological community, however, is understood as having a firm grounding in faith in the Trinity and God’s design to create community in his own likeness. This apparent conflict can be overcome by allowing SNA to capture the current state of specific community network, a snapshot portraying the specific relationship and state of a network during a given time period. The community may change, but the picture offered is still a true record of what was once the community structure. While SNA does not attempt to explain or validate an ideological or religious grounding of community, neither does it stand in contradiction to a theological grounding.

Therefore, theological images, definitions and models of community presented in this chapter can be utilised within a SNA understanding of community in such a way as not to

lose their distinctiveness and grounding in faith. An example of integrating ideas of SNA in a theological study can be seen in Nancy Tantom Ammerman's study *Congregation and Community* concerning how church congregations react to changes in the local community. As a sociologist of religion, Ammerman sees congregations as a part of the community institutional structure which makes social life possible. These structures and connections are understood as "living networks of meaning and activity, constructed by the individual and collective agents who inhabit and sustain them".¹¹² While she does not directly employ SNA, her understanding of community is supported by a similar assumption of community, describing it as "functioning as a network". In addressing the "loss of community" thesis between modern urban life and earlier folk society she states that it is not a case of decline in close personal ties. Rather relationships are embedded "in a larger matrix of the very sorts of segmented relations are indeed a new feature of modern life".¹¹³

Going further she asserts "understanding of the social systems of modern life must start with the individual's network of relations."¹¹⁴ Her study looks at how congregations are connected to their communities through members' networks and associated organisations, which affect the local church. These connections unite the congregation to the greater society through "webs of relationships out of which community structure is created and maintained".¹¹⁵ In this way, she states, the church congregation becomes a key part of the social web of a community. Theological and sociological ideas about community can work together to enrich understandings of community as networked relationships.

TOWARDS DEFINING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The network of relationships existing within Christian community, the specific focus of this study, must be understood as rooted in a common belief in God and an emerging sense of communal destiny. A common belief or narrative shaping community relationships and behaviours binds members. Referring to Christian community as "story-formed" offers additional scope to explore how the networks of relationships evolve and are maintained.

¹¹² Nancy Tantom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 346.

¹¹³ Ammerman, p. 351.

¹¹⁴ Ammerman, p. 352.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

American theologian Stanley Hauerwas, who writes of how community relates to social politics and ethics, has developed the idea of the “story-formed community.” He holds a cautious view of the term “community”, seeing an end goal as the Church *being* a social ethic, rather than having a social ethic.¹¹⁶ When Hauerwas uses the word “community” in reference to Church, it is with the idea that the Church is a body polity. With such understanding he states, “good communities result from shared judgements derived from skills acquired through training necessary to pursue certain practices...Different practices require different virtues”.¹¹⁷ Community, therefore, does not evolve; it is shaped.

Regarding Church being a social ethic, Hauerwas describes Church as a “community of character”, trying to be true to the character of God as revealed in the scriptures. This community of character is also a “story-formed community” which becomes a “counter story” to the political and social world in which it exists as it interprets and lives out its story. In a “story-formed community”, form and substance are dependent on a “truthful narrative”, itself bound to the community’s history. Individuals alone lack a common history sufficient to provide resources necessary to find purpose in life.¹¹⁸ They choose to tie themselves to a given community in order to find meaning. Thus, one’s “capacity to be virtuous depends on the existence of communities, which have been formed by narratives faithful to the character of reality”.¹¹⁹ It is the narrative, the story behind the community, which gives meaning and perspective for group members’ attitudes and actions. Understanding a community’s story is essential in order to understand how they view reality and the world.

For the Church, the gospels are “manuals for the training necessary to be part of the new community”.¹²⁰ Hauerwas acknowledges story interpretation might be diverse, just as a variety of perspectives are noted in each account of the four gospels. Yet community must draw on a common set of interpretations about their history in order to provide the “sense that they are more alike than unlike”.¹²¹ A narrative is essentially a form of interpretation of a given history, and “the power of a narrative lies precisely in its potential for producing a community of interpretation sufficient for the growth of further narratives”.¹²² Thus,

¹¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company. The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 25.

¹¹⁷ Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, p. 9.

¹¹⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 125.

¹¹⁹ Lemos, p. 116.

¹²⁰ Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 49.

¹²¹ Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 60.

¹²² Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 95.

Christians are in essence a “storied people.” The most important social task of the Christian community is to be a community capable of “forming people with virtues to witness to God’s truth in the world”.¹²³

In this chapter the theological discussion provides form and substance to the story of Christian community, as understood in this research project. The meta-narrative within theology is creation-fall-redemption-consummation, spotlighted in the discussion of Trinity and marriage. Here the story told is of humanity created to mirror the divine union of the Godhead. The nature and character of that narrative illustrates how the church (*ekklesia*) becomes known as community (*koinonia*) of communion. It is a narrative of relationship through sharing. The story also allows for multiple readings as different aspects of the story are highlighted through various models and images offered in this chapter. Each offers a distinct picture singling out a certain aspect of the story of Christian community, elucidating different interpretations of the functions of the church. While the storytelling is different, depending on the focus of the specific storyteller (denomination/church group), the narrative remains constant, providing a grid for understanding Christian community.

The sociological discussion can also be related to the idea of story-formed community. In a Social Network Analysis approach individuals are seen to gather around a common subject/story through which connections are established and solidified. Group members must have a certain level of interpretation agreement of the subject/story. Often when individuals fail to live by that interpretative framework group relationship is terminated. Identifying the story helps bring understanding to where community members find unity and meaning. Understanding how individuals relate to the story and noting narrative elements used to support story integrity helps form a clearer picture of the network of communal connections.

Summarising community as a network that is “story-formed” provides a fuller understanding of how theological and sociological ideas of community come together.¹²⁴ Whether the prophetic story of communion and marriage, showing the distinctiveness of Christian community, or the story of community-as-network, representing structuring and interaction

¹²³ Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 3.

¹²⁴ An in-depth exploration of Hauerwas and narrative theology is outwith the confines of this thesis. For a much fuller discussion of Hauerwas in relation to this area consult: Samuel Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998).

within social relations, the story motif enables community formation and relationship to be described more fully.

It is being argued in this study that investigating community as network and identifying a community's stories is essential in order to understand and describe how communities have formed through the Internet. This means describing not only the relational networks and stories of a given online community, but understanding larger narratives that influence them. The online world itself is embedded in a distinct context, cyberspace. The underlying narrative structure of the world of the Internet offers a specific worldview and understanding of reality. The Internet is a medium representing a metaphor. It is also postulated that online communities, unique in their form and function, are linked to "real world" communities with distinct characteristics and patterns of behaviour in the world. These connections to real world community networks influence the structure and interaction of online communities. Both represent stories needing to be uncovered and described, which will be the focus in chapter two.

SUMMARY: APPROACHING COMMUNITY

At the heart of Christian community are a variety of images, words and models used to describe various aspects of its structure and relationships. In this chapter traditional theological understandings of church community are re-defined to point to a re-conception of community as a network of relationships. In this study community is conceived of theologically as emerging from God's desire to create a human community "for his good pleasure" to mirror the union experienced by the Trinity. Through discussing the disembodied community of the Godhead, a picture emerges of how embodied community should look, illustrated through marriage. Community is created by God and destined for complete fulfilment in consummation, described in Revelation as the Spirit and the Bride (the church) uniting with divine community.

The connection of the disembodied community of the Divine with the embodied community described as the People of God and Body of Christ is understood through the act of communion. In this symbolic meal members partake together of visible elements that presuppose an invisible connection with each other and God. These unseen spiritual connections can be seen as a spiritual network of relationships both between members of the Church and the Godhead. Combining this with a Social Network Analysis approach to

community as network enables a conception of community focused on inter-personal and spiritual interconnections in networks of relationship. This discussion provides an exciting new potential to describe and conceive of Christian community and spiritually mediated relationships. Re-interpreted biblical and theological images with a relational emphasis allow this to take place.

While the concept of community will continue to be developed throughout this thesis, at this point community is defined as a network of relationships between individuals connecting to a common purpose, whose bonds are created and sustained through shared traits and/or beliefs. Christian community is understood, at this point, as a community network of oneness, congregating through the creation-fall-redemption-consummation story and seeking to reflect the nature of divine community in the ways in which it relates to members and its Creator. The church represents an expression of community illustrating how and for what purpose individuals gather for fellowship.

In chapter two the Internet and the concept of cyberspace will be explored in-depth, as well as their linkage to the concept of community. When community goes online it poses new challenges to traditional understanding. Issues such as virtual reality, anonymity and asynchronous communication redefine relationships and practices within communities. These practices have potential to alter not only behaviour but also personal conceptions of what constitutes community.

CHAPTER 2

UNDERSTANDING THE INTERNET AND CYBERSPACE

INTRODUCTION

*“He who grasps the wire is powerful.
He who grasps the wire and the screen is very powerful.
He who will someday grasp the wire and the screen and the computer will possess the power
of God the Father himself.”¹*

The Internet is a new communication medium. Rooted in the American military of the 1950s, in the 21st century it has evolved into a common piece of technology in many homes. While it is often characterised simply as a tool, Internet technology also carries with it distinct ideologies and beliefs about the society. The story behind emergence of the Internet reveals a narrative of potentiality and control. Cyberspace is more than a phrase used to describe the territory existing behind the computer screen; it is a metaphoric construct describing a certain understanding of the world. The Internet is as much a reality-shaping medium, as it is a tool for communication. Understanding the Internet and cyberspace in both contexts is vital for this study.

Chapter one presented an overview of ways the term community is used and defined in relation to theology and sociology. Chapter two defines and describes the Internet and cyberspace. As mentioned at the conclusion of chapter one, communities often find identity and cohesion in terms of a unifying narrative around which individuals gather. The idea of “story formation” is important in this chapter as stories surrounding the Internet and cyberspace’s emergence are identified and explored.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the Internet and cyberspace and investigate their ideological roots in order to understand how these ideas shape the online context where community formation is taking place. First, a description of the history of the Internet is presented demonstrating how its development brought with it various beliefs and

¹ Quote attributed to an unnamed French Publisher responding to Gerard Thery’s announcement of the advent of a “paperless society”, cited in: Andrew Feenberg, ‘From information to Communication--The French Experience with Videotext’ in *Contexts of Computer-Mediated Communication*, ed. by Martin Lea (London: Wheatsheaf and Harvester, 1992), p. 172.

philosophical ideas about computer technology. Secondly, the story of cyberspace will be identified, by examining cyberspace as both a metaphoric construct rooted in science fiction and a term used to describe symbolically the process of computer networking does this. Thirdly, four models of the Internet are presented as tools to help describe ways in which people conceive of and utilise Internet technology. Fourthly, a spectrum of responses to technology and how these positions influence reactions to the Internet are outlined. Responses by the Christian community to the Internet are also noted here.

HISTORY OF THE INTERNET

*"In the beginning ARPA created ARPANET.
And the ARPANET was without form and void.
And darkness was upon the deep.
And the spirit of ARPA moved upon the face of the network and ARPA said, 'Let there be a protocol' and there was a protocol. And ARPA saw that it was good.
And ARPA said, 'Let there be more protocols,' and it was so. And ARPA saw that it was good.
And ARPA said, 'let there be more networks,' and it was so."*

-Danny Cohen at ARPANET'S twentieth year anniversary symposium at UCLA, 1989²

The Internet is a global network of large computers connected via phone-lines enabling individuals to connect with other computers all over the world. Many people equate the Internet with the World Wide Web (WWW); however, it is just one component of what constitutes "the Net". Referred to as the network of all connected networks, the Internet is not a single network or program, but "rather a connection of many different networks across the globe; hence the name".³ It encompasses a collection of services and operations such as electronic mail (commonly known as email), bulletin board services, chat rooms, computer network navigational systems and multimedia components such as RealAudio/Video technology. Though an in-depth look at computer development might prove insightful, the focus of this section is on the history of computer technology in relation to the Internet.⁴

The creation of the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC) in 1945 and the launch of Sputnik in 1957 were key events in leading to birth of the Internet. The space race

² Cited in: Katie Hafner and Matthew Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late: Origins of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 256.

³ For a detailed account of the history of computing consult: Paul Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 295.

⁴ This section provides a brief overview of Internet history for a more extensive survey consult: Roy Rosenzweig, 'Wizards, Bureaucrats, Warriors and Hackers: Writing the History of the Internet', in *American Historical Review* 103.5 (December 1998), p. 1531.

prompted the U.S. Defence Department to investigate establishing a “survivable national network” system that could be maintained in case of communication disruption in a time of war.⁵ It established the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) also in 1957 to fund researchers dispersed throughout the United States involved in this task.

Through research into thermonuclear war scenarios, Paul Baran and the RAND Corporation in California began to strategize creating a decentralised computer network that could survive the loss of one or more nodes of communication. Through this emerged “packet switching”, a means to break data into small equal sized packets that could travel electronically along telephone lines and reassemble them at a given destination, eliminating the need for a central command centre. By the end of 1969 the ARPA Computer Network, ARPANET, went online. This first network consisted of four nodes at different locations on the West Coast of America, growing in two years to over 30 different computer communities.

At first ARPANET remained a relatively small and closed community, but by the mid-1970s many research institutions which did not have access to it were anxious to have the ability to transfer data too. The creation of other systems, such as UNIX, a time-share operating system, helped widen the audience of the network.⁶ In other parts of the world new networks began to spring up such as Joint Academic Network (JANET) in the UK.

ARPA’s network domination began to break down in the 1980s with the advent of the personal computer, built at the Palo Alto Research Centre (PARC). Not wanting to lose the personal communication they had grown accustomed to on ARPANET, its creators developed Ethernet, a local area network linking all computers in their building. “Internetworking” was still primarily accessible only to those inside the scientific community, yet “the more useful this powerful tool proved to be, the more people who were not originally authorised to use it wanted to get their hands on it”.⁷

This led to the split of ARPANET in 1983 into MILNET, focused on Defence internetworking, with the research backbone remaining on ARPANET. The Internet Activities Board (IAB) was formed as an independent committee of researchers to

⁵ Historical and time line information primarily taken from: Paul Salus, *Casting the Net: From ARPANET to Internet and Beyond* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995), p. 5.

⁶ Salus, p. 127.

⁷ Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), p. 83.

coordinate Internet activities. The Internet was defined as “a collection of over two thousand packet switched networks” located worldwide.⁸ ARPANET was formally decommissioned in 1990 opening the way for privatisation and Internet development.

Also in 1990 a researcher at the CERN physics laboratory in Switzerland created the WWW, a multimedia application and navigational tool. By following a web of pointers users were able to locate on the network where specific information was actually stored.⁹ Helped by the Mosaic interface, the forerunner of Netscape, graphics, text and sounds were integrated into “pages” of information. Point-and-click mouse technology allowed users visual interactions with the network.

The United States High Performance Computing Act of 1991, allocating funding for upgrading the network for public and school access, transitioned the Internet from governmental to a private enterprise. Corporations such as IBM and AT&T began staking claims on the Net. In 1993 administrative functions of Internet management such as assigning addresses, maintaining directories and information services, were turned over to private companies, thus placing the Net in the public domain.

Current use of the word Internet typically refers to the connection of a variety of software, hardware and computer systems. From this point onwards the Internet is understood as the “network of all connected networks”, an access tool and method in which numerous forms of computing technology are connected. Yet as this chapter portrays, the Internet is more than a tool, it is a medium, shaping culture and carrier of ideas about technology.

This brief historical overview highlights two key themes regarding the Internet: fear and potentiality. Beginning in the cold war’s culture of suspicion, Internet technology was created in response to the fear of looming devastation produced by the advent of nuclear technology. Created to sustain communication in the midst of catastrophe, the Internet from its inception came out of an underlying current of alarm and mistrust. Yet, the Internet’s development and expansion also illustrate the belief in a positive view of progress, universal rights to access and promotion of freedom of information. The Internet is pictured as a new land of opportunity. These ideas will be explored more in-depth in the following section as the concept of cyberspace is defined and its philosophical framework unmasked.

⁸ Salus, p. 208

⁹ Hafner and Lyon, p. 257.

THE STORY OF CYBERSPACE

*“Assembled word **cyberspace** from small and readily available components of language. Neologic spasm: the primal act of pop poetics. Preceded any concept whatsoever. Slick and hollow—awaiting received meaning. All I did: folded words as taught. Now other words accrete in the interstices...”*

*-William Gibson, *Academy Leader*¹⁰*

The concept of cyberspace began long before the Internet became a household word and available to the public; it emerged from ideas born in science fiction and fantasy literature. As was stated in the introduction, William Gibson created the word cyberspace, describing it as “a consensual hallucination”¹¹ where one agrees to be absorbed by a technologically constructed reality. Yet cyberspace is not just a created word linked to science fiction (SF); many computer programmers and scientists found SF fantasy describing what they were attempting to create in actuality. Therefore it became an image or metaphor to describe how the individuals understand the Internet to function. For some cyberspace is still about the realm of fiction, creating new space for fantasy and experimentation. It is used as a way to propagate these ideas of reality. For others cyberspace is used to describe an actual space existing somewhere beyond the computer screen.

The purpose of this section is to explore the story of cyberspace. This entails considering the origins of cyberspace and its underlying philosophical framework. First, “Cyberspace in Fiction” details how it emerged from science fiction or cyberpunk literature and how this influences popular understandings of the term. Secondly, “Cyberspace as Non-Fiction” investigating how this word is used and concepts behind it illustrates how cyberspace is viewed as reality and not just as a metaphor.

CYBERSPACE IN FICTION: ROOTS IN SCIENCE FICTION

Understanding cyberspace begins by considering science fiction (SF). SF literature, film and art have provided ideas shaping how this space existing within computers and on the network is pictured and interacted with. This genre promotes a distinct view of the world needing to be identified. Gibson’s SF classic *Neuromancer*, where the word cyberspace is

¹⁰ William Gibson, ‘Academy Leader’, in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, ed. by Michael Benedikt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 27.

¹¹ William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Book, 1984), p. 51.

introduced, presents a near future world where most of earth's computers have been connected in a global network. People enter the network through "a virtual-reality grid space" known as cyberspace. Gibson says he used this term to suggest,

*The point at which media (flow) together and surround us. It's the ultimate extension of the exclusion of daily life. With cyberspace as I describe it you can literally wrap yourself in the media and not have to see what's really going on around you.*¹²

Cyberspace is a mythical space, a closed reality, an inorganic area existing beyond the computer screen. It is about immersion in a medium which blocks out the world of the five senses, in exchange for a world created within a computer. It has been said Gibson came up with the idea of cyberspace "after witnessing the spectacle of a child in a hypnotic symbiosis with a video arcade game".¹³

Cyberspace opens for discussion what is actually "virtual" and what is "real" in the world of the computer. Virtual, as it is used in computer science, means to denote something "whose existence is simulated with software rather than actually existing in hardware or some physical form".¹⁴ It is often combined with other words, such as virtual reality or virtual community, to describe an "un-real" copy of something that exists in the "real world". The world of cyberspace is closely related to the concept of "virtual reality" (VR). VR technology is a manifestation of cyberspace. It involves using computer graphics and images to create a technological reality that is human controlled. Science fiction typically paints a dark picture of the world. The "real world" is often seen as fundamentally flawed and cyberspace is a welcomed escape, as shown through Case, the key character in *Neuromancer*, in his return after an extended absence:

*Please, he prayed, now—
A gray disk, the color of Chiba sky.
Now—
Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler grey...
And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, unfolding his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending into infinity
...And somewhere he was laughing, in a white painted loft, distant finger caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face.*¹⁵

¹² Benjamin Woolley, *Virtual Worlds* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), p. 122.

¹³ Douglas Rushkoff, *Cyberia* (New York: HarperCollins-Flamingo, 1994), p. 12.

¹⁴ Starr Roxanne Hiltz, 'Constructing and Evaluating a Virtual Classroom', in *Contexts of Computer-Mediated Communication*. ed. by Martin Lea (London: Wheatsheaf/Harvester, 1992), p. 188.

¹⁵ Gibson, *Neuromancer*, p. 52.

Entering cyberspace provides relief from real world imperfections. A self-selecting reality where the best bits of the physical world can be combined with elements of fantasy, VR is seen to empower humans with the ability to play God and write a new book of Genesis. In SF, computers enable people to make right the wrongs existing in the physical world by creating a new world with a different set of rules. However there is a tension between the utopian technological world it is said to create and the dystopic reality often painted in SF.

For many, cyberspace is utopia. This is true not just for SF authors, but in the beliefs of many creators and users of the technology. Sherry Turkle, one of the first researchers on computer cultures, studied the hacker culture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In her book *The Second Self* she found hackers were mostly young, male, computer science students or researchers fixated on programming and pastimes such as “sport death” which involve pushing the mind and body to its limits in round-the-clock programming sprees. Many describe programming as a “Zen-like experience” enabling them to lose track of reality, speaking of science fiction as an ideology rather than a fantasy. As one hacker, Alex attests,

When you type mail into the computer you feel you can say anything.... The touch is very sensitive. I don't even feel that I am typing. It feels much more like one of those Vulcan mind melds, you know, that Spock does on Star Trek. I am thinking it, and there it is on the screen. I would say I have perfect interface with the machine...perfect for me. I feel totally telepathic with the computer.¹⁶

Some hackers see science fiction as prophecy. Technology becomes a way to realise new forms of existence within a computer-controlled reality. From this brief look at cyberspace in the context of science fiction, several key values and beliefs emerge. First, cyberspace is presented as a place of potential; inside the computer lies a new world to be created as well as explored. Individual choice through the ability to create is valued. The idea that salvation can come through technology is also an ever-present ideal. In one sense the cyberspace metaphor is often grounded in a sense of hope for a better world within the computer network. As Buick states,

The mystical and all encompassing vocabulary of 'cyberia' and the 'internet' is symptomatic of the participants' desire to create a utopian world of total knowledge, a human made machine with all the answers.¹⁷

¹⁶ Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. (London: Granada Publishing Limited., 1985), p. 217.

¹⁷ Joanna Buick and Zoran Jevtic, *Introducing Cyberspace* (New York: Totem Books, 1995), p. 26.

Yet cyberspace also invokes a dark side of humanity, even fear. Cyberspace is about control and the ability to manipulate not just an environment but other individuals in that environment. The state and conditions of the SF world are dependent on those in control of it and their intentions. These ideas can be studied in more detail through exploring SF films produced in the past two decades. Movies such as *Tron*¹⁸ and *Jonny Mneumonic*¹⁹ envision an oppressive future where man is controlled by computer technology. This is classically expressed by Spike (Henry Rollins) in *Jonny Mneumonic* commenting on a disease ravaging humanity brought on by computers. He says,

*What causes it? The world causes it...information overload. All the electronics around you poisoning the airwaves, technological f**ing civilisation, but we still have all this because we can't live without it.*

Sherman and Judkins address this concern in their book *Glimpses of Heaven, Visions of Hell*²⁰ suggesting in their title that what for some might be heaven, could for others be hell. In the SF worlds of *The Matrix*²¹ and *Terminator*²², humans are forced to live in oppressive, slavery-like conditions when computers dominate the landscape. In these films the sky is covered in darkness and the sun no longer shines, the world is physically dark and so is the future. This seems to directly contrast with images painted by many cyberspace promoters who describe the “virtual frontier” as a kind of “promised land” flowing with unlimited access to information that will improve existence. Cyberspace in fiction presents a story of hope mingled with hopelessness.

CYBERSPACE AS NON-FICTION: FROM METAPHOR TO REALITY

Today, cyberspace is a concept not confined to science fiction novels or movies. Douglas Rushkoff explains in *Cyberia*, “in a bizarre self-fulfilling prophecy, the SF concept of reality that can be consciously designed begins to emerge as a belief”.²³ Many have promoted seeing cyberspace as a reality, using cyberspace as a descriptive noun of an actual physical space.

¹⁸ *Tron*, Steven Lisberger (director), Walt Disney Video, 1982.

¹⁹ *Jonny Mneumonic*, Robert Longo (director), 20th Century Fox, 1995.

²⁰ Barrie Sherman and Phil Judkins. *Glimpses of Heaven, Vision of Hell, Virtual Reality and Its Implication*. London: Coronet Books. 1992, p. 249.

²¹ *The Matrix*, Andy and Larry Wachowski (directors), Village Roadshow Pictures, 1999.

²² *The Terminator*, James Cameron (director), Orion Pictures, 1984.

²³ Rushkoff, p. 13.

In 1991 *Cyberspace: First Steps* offered one of the first attempts by computer scientists and philosophers to describe and define cyberspace. A series of images were presented in the introduction describing cyberspace as “an unhappy word...dystopic vision of the future”, “a parallel universe created and sustained by the world’s computers and communication lines”, “a screen becomes a virtual world, everywhere and nowhere...” and “the realm of pure information”.²⁴ Cyberspace was shown as a realm of potential, waiting for its full incarnation. Editor Michael Benedikt, a professor of architecture and software consultant, prophesied,

*Cyberspace has a geography, a physics, a nature, and a rule of human law. In cyberspace the common man, and the information worker—cowboy or infocrat—can search, manipulate, create or control information directly; he can be entertained or trained, seek solitude or company, win or lose power...indeed, can ‘live’ or ‘die’ as he will.*²⁵

At the time Benedikt admitted this conception was “under construction”, existing fully only in the SF world and dreams of computer scientists. Yet he claimed cyberspace would be both a physical reality and a new realm of consciousness. Michael Heim, a VR philosopher, also voiced this stating cyberspace was about more than just computer interface design; it was “a metaphysical laboratory, a tool for examining our sense of reality”²⁶ Seeing cyberspace as a laboratory for new ways of thinking and being has influenced not only those in the field of computer science, but also mainstream society through increased computer usage.

As people spend more time in activities related to computers they often desire to project boundaries and features of the physical world onto this new space. Many attribute this tendency to the initial success of Apple Computers and their desktop metaphor, giving the computer interface a “real world” representation. Macintosh style icons (a desktop with folders and even a trashcan) soon became the industry standard. More than offering a “user-friendly” way for people to learn to use a computer it began to inform how people engaged with technology. As Turkle commented in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*,

²⁴ Michael Benedikt, ‘Introduction’, in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, ed. by Michael Benedikt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 1-3.

²⁵ Michael Benedikt, ‘Cyberspace: Some Proposals’, in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, ed. by Michael Benedikt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 123.

²⁶ Michael Heim, ‘The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace’, in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, ed. by Michael Benedikt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 59.



These new interfaces modelled a way of understanding that depended on getting to know a computer through interacting with it as one might get to know a person or explore a town.²⁷

While IBM and DOS systems initially encouraged users to understand the mechanisms inside and the underlying structure of how computers worked, Turkle says Macs encouraged users to stay “at the surface” and engage solely with the interface. This helped facilitate a shift from what she describes as “a culture of calculation to a culture of simulation” where,

We have learned to take things at interface value. We are moving towards a culture of simulation in which people are increasingly comfortable with substituting representations of reality for the real.²⁸

This blurring of the artificial and the real has a tendency to lead to what philosopher Jean Baudrillard referred to as the “satellisation of the real”. Baudrillard claimed humanity has become enveloped in a technological cocoon shaping its understanding of the world. The “real” is simulated through signs or metaphors. These simulations become primary, replacing what they represent. This, he said, causes reality to “implode” into the “hyperreal” so reality is “no longer real at all”.²⁹ For Baudrillard, an image begins reflecting a basic reality, but soon begins to mask and pervert what it is representing. Then the image disguises the absence of the initial reality, until finally it bears no relation to any reality whatsoever. Applying this to media technology Baudrillard says, “we must think of the media as if they were...a sort of genetic code, which controls the mutation of the real into the hyperreal”.³⁰ In the case of the Internet and computers what is seen on the screen is considered real, even if it is only a representation of the processes taking place. Turkle echoes this, saying, “in the culture of simulation, if it works for you, it has all the reality it needs”.³¹

Mark Numes, in his article “Jean Baudrillard in Cyberspace: Internet, Virtuality and Postmodernity”, says the Internet is becoming what Baudrillard refers to as “third order simulacrum” where “map of the territory is itself the territory”.³² On the Internet that “which was previously mentally projected, which was lived as a metaphor in the terrestrial habitat is

²⁷ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. (London: Phoenix Paperbacks, 1995), p. 23.

²⁸ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 23.

²⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 3.

³⁰ Baudrillard, p. 55.

³¹ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 24.

³² Mark Numes, ‘Jean Baudrillard in Cyberspace: Internet, Virtuality and Postmodernity’ in *Style*, 29.2 (1995), p. 318.

from now on projected entirely without metaphor into the absolute space of simulation".³³ In other words, cyberspace becomes an actuality; more than just a way of describing the space created by the networking of computers, it is considered an actual place existing in the "real world". People now use cyberspace as a noun, connecting it to a sense of territory without knowing what it truly represents. "It has now entered into common speech on and off the Internet as shorthand for this conception of computer networks as a cybernetic space," says Nunes.³⁴

Seeing cyberspace as an actual place has been actively promoted by the Digerati such as Esther Dyson (Electronic Frontiers Foundation), Bill Gates (Microsoft) and Michael Dertouzos (head of the MIT labs). Cyberspace promoters use metaphoric language to describe the function and purpose of the Internet, a new information space accessible to everyone. The "information highway" and seeing cyberspace as a "web" of connections are two common metaphors used to describe the structure of cyberspace.

The highway metaphor can be traced to American Senator Al Gore who popularised the term "information superhighway" when introducing the 1991 High Performance Computing Act. Describing the emerging computer network system as a "superhighway" connected to the legacy of Gore's father who had sponsored the 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act establishing the US interstate highway system. The Clinton-Gore administration continued to promote the expansion of a national information infrastructure, regularly employing the highway metaphor when speaking about the subject.

The highway metaphor has not been limited to the realm of politics. Cyberanarchists and computer marketers describe the new free space with such catchy slogans as, "national borders are just speedbumps on the information superhighway".³⁵ Microsoft's Bill Gates focuses his book *The Road Ahead* around the image of a highway as he leads people on a journey through the potential development of the computer industry claiming "everyone will be touched by the information highway".³⁶ This highway claims to eliminate distances and connect people to resources and other individuals. Yet, Gates admits the highway metaphor "isn't quite right" because it emphasises infrastructure rather than applications and

³³ Nunes, p. 315.

³⁴ Nunes, p. 314.

³⁵ Timothy May, 'BlackNet Worries', in *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*, ed. by Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 249.

³⁶ Bill Gates, *The Road Ahead* (New York: Viking-Penguin Books, 1995), p. xiii.

encourages readers to see the road as a marketplace where digital information will be the new medium of exchange.

Describing cyberspace as a network or a web is linked to descriptions of those who created computer networking technology. This has become an especially powerful metaphor, often noted as a more accurate portrayal of how the Internet works. Even Microsoft in its '98 version of Windows opted to replace the desktop metaphor with the icons and symbolism of a network. Alec McHoul, in the electronic journal *Postmodern Culture*, states a web offers a more accurate expression of cyberspace for popular culture,

What moves is no longer 'information' along a highway...What moves on the web is the movement of the web itself. Its motion creates the sites that it is possible to move to. This deletes the distinction between space and matter that is crucial to everyday thinking. In the web, 'space' informs matter how to move and matter 'informs' space how to shape itself.³⁷

An image of a web or network introduces a decentralised view of power and control. In a web interactions can begin from a variety of points or perspectives; the path information travels has more options. This conception allows for redefinition of traditional boundaries. Cyber-Feminists, such as Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant, suggest the birth of the Internet in late capitalistic culture and its military complex often tie discussions of cyberspace to limited real world ideologies. Framing cyberspace as a matrix or network, they assert, unlocks the potential for redefining the power relations typically biased towards masculinist structures.

The network-web metaphor has obvious links to technological developments of computer "internetworking" mentioned in the history of the Internet section. Also the way in which it is frequently used resonates with the SF notions of reality introduced previously in this section where the goal is to lose oneself in the technology, or as Gibson said, to "wrap yourself in the media". The web image offers freedom and escape, yet in the dark side of SF it is also something which one becomes trapped in. This is shown as Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) in the movie *The Matrix*³⁸ proclaims "the matrix is everywhere, it's all around

³⁷ Alec McHoul, 'Cyberbeing and ~space', at *Postmodern Culture*, 8.1 (1 September 1997) accessed 8 June 1998

<http://muse.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/access.cgi?url=/journals/postmodern_culture/v008/8.1mchoul.html&session=47875109>

³⁸ *The Matrix*, Andy and Larry Wachowski (directors), Village Roadshow Pictures, 1999.

you...” and in the infamous cyber-sex scene in *Lawnmower Man*³⁹ where the female cyborg becomes caught in a VR web, unable to escape her dominator.

Metaphors attempt to offer a simplified picture to describe a complex concept. In the case of cyberspace, metaphors have been used not only as attempts to describe how computer technology functions, but also to present new realities. Whether referred to as “information highway” or “web”, the language of cyberspace can be seen as more than a way to describe how individuals interact with the Internet.

SUMMARY

This section has presented two readings of the cyberspace story. *Cyberspace in Fiction* highlights its roots in science fiction causing certain themes to emerge. First, a desire for humans and machines or technology to merge. Secondly, cyberspace creates an opportunity to form a new reality, where the virtual world presents escape from the real world. Thirdly, technology is portrayed as offering hope for the future. Fourthly, cyberspace also creates a dark dystopia; the technological world creates oppression and control over humanity.

Cyberspace as Non-Fiction demonstrates how cyberspace has moved from the world of the arts and computer science into mainstream culture. This transition brings with it certain underlying values and views of the world. Just as in Baudrillard's arguments of the “satellisation of the real”, where metaphors become the reality, cyberspace has in many ways become distanced from the basic reality of computer network it seeks to represent. This simulation has happened as cyberspace has generated other metaphors, such as highway and web, that further distance the model from the real (and even this initial image can be said to be based on fantasy and myth).

It is recognised that cyberspace is used to describe where information-exchange and interaction takes place online, yet its ultimate function is as a metaphor. From this point onwards cyberspace is defined as the metaphorical space behind the screen of the computer, shaped and informed by ideas from science fiction and virtual reality, used to describe the place where computer networking takes place. Essentially, it has been argued that the concept of cyberspace creates a laboratory to explore reality. As a “reality laboratory” it

³⁹ *The Lawnmower Man*, Brett Leonard (director), New Line Video, 1992.

offers different perspectives of how online life functions. This is the focus of the next section.

MODELS OF THE INTERNET

“Welcome to the 21st century. You are a Netizen (Net Citizen), and you exist as a citizen of the world thanks to the global connectivity that the Net gives you. Geographical separation is replaced by existence in the same virtual space.... We are seeing revitalisation of society. The frameworks are being redesigned from the bottom up. A new more democratic world is becoming possible.... Social connections, which never before were possible, are now much more accessible ... Information, and thus people, are coming alive.”
 -posted by Michael Hauben on the Daily News Usenet, 6 July 1993⁴⁰

The focus of this section is to present various conceptions of the Internet and ways they influence how individuals operate or “live” in cyberspace. Only recently have models describing life on the Internet begun to be articulated. Phil Agre in his article “The Internet and Public Discourse” proposes a series of models to address social-political controversies surrounding the Internet. He describes the Internet as a communications medium, a computer system, a discourse and a set of standards.⁴¹ While Agre’s models will be noted in this section, essentially they do a better job of addressing legal and political concerns than looking at the Internet as a social phenomenon. Therefore, four alternate models are offered.

These Internet models describe and highlight a particular focus of the online context. They serve as tools to describe how people relate to and function in cyberspace. They are: The Internet as information space; The Internet as common mental geography; The Internet as “identity workshop” and The Internet as social space. Each model is defined and critiqued as to how it shapes people’s online uses and practices. While these ideas have been identified in other Internet research studies⁴², presenting them as specific models of the Internet is unique to this research study. Other models, such as the Internet as global matrix or technological empire could be identified and described, yet these four represent dominant conceptions of the Internet in relation to findings presented in this study.

⁴⁰ Susan Leigh Star, ‘Introduction’, in *Culture of the Internet*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers and the Sociological Review, 1995), p. 22.

⁴¹ Phil Agre, ‘The Internet and Public Discourse’, at *First Monday*, (2 March 1998) accessed 25 June 1998 <http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_3/agre>

⁴² Such as Markham’s categorisations of the Internet as a tool, place and state of being. Consult: Annette Markham, *Life Online* (CA: AltaMira Press, 1998)

THE INTERNET AS INFORMATION SPACE

The Internet as information space model focuses on data structures making up the Internet. The Internet is seen as a library with endless volumes of information, a warehouse of knowledge accessible to anyone. In this model the Internet is often referred to as the realm of pure information and the WWW is seen as its holding house. This relates to ideas expressed by Agre in the "Internet as a communications medium". Here he argues this is the dominant conception of the Internet, seeing it as a communication technology or a "meta-medium" facilitating interaction.⁴³ The Internet exists for the utilitarian purpose of transferring messages. Individuals use the Internet as a tool to locate their desired data on the "Infobahn".

The Internet as information space model focuses on communication for information exchange. The Internet allows individuals to utilise a variety of software and technologies to interact with data and the people connected with it. One of the unique aspects of the Internet is it allows each netizen to simultaneously be "a publisher as well as a consumer of information".⁴⁴ The participatory nature of this technology is one of its more intriguing features. Unlike TV or radio, individuals are users, not simply viewers; they are not limited by a specific programming schedule for the information available. They can respond instantly with approval or disapproval via email to most web sites they visit. With minimal resources, in comparison to public access to television or pirate radio, individuals can publish their own web site or start an email list on their preferred topic. Thus, people online focus on generating and discovering information of personal interest. Internet technology is valued for its ability to retrieve and store data.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) focuses users' interactions on texts, whether constructed by a specific news group or presented on a web site. "CMC reflects a shift of the attentional focus to the content and context of the message," say Spears and Lea.⁴⁵ The attention is on the message over the producer, the textual creation instead of the text creator. These texts focus individuals on representations of reality. Importance is placed on conceptions of what they are interacting with online over what is behind the words. Nunes argues that in the virtual world of the Internet, "our words are our bodies"⁴⁶ where people

⁴³ Agre, <http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_3/agre>

⁴⁴ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 97.

⁴⁵ Richard Spears and Martin Lea, 'Social influence and the influence of the 'social' in computer-mediated communication', in *Contexts of Computer-Mediated Communication*, ed. by Martin Lea (London: Wheatsheaf/Harvester, 1992), p. 40.

⁴⁶ Nunes, p. 326.

become known by their words or their taglines. The texts presented become the defining factor in who one is in cyberspace and what one does. Thus, in this model, the Internet world is seen through the eyes of information; people are seen as word-body constructs. In the essay "Sex and Death Among the Disembodied: VR, Cyberspace and the Nature of Academic Discourse," Allucquere Stone alludes to this malleable word-body construct stating,

*What's being sent back and forth over the wires isn't merely information, its bodies-not physical objects, but the information necessary to reconstruct the meaning of the body to almost any desired depth or complexity.*⁴⁷

Through text, readers construct mental images of the other. Information space dictates individuals become known as data producers. Texts produced are seen as representing the totality of the particular producer, limiting interpersonal engagement with them at a deeper level. Information becomes abstracted from its author or creator; the focus becomes gathering data.

This points to one of the weaknesses of this model, a tendency towards depersonalising those who generate the text. Theodore Roszak in *The Cult of Information* argues this occurs as those in the information society mistake access to information for knowledge, or what he refers to as ideas.⁴⁸ He argues information is acquired by gathering, while ideas are acquired by thinking; access to information does not equal the ability to process or apply it. He also states proliferation and ease of access to digitised data have produced information overload or "data glut", too much information and not enough time to process it. "An excess of information may actually crowd out ideas," claims Roszak, "leaving the mind...distracted by sterile, disconnected facts, losing shapeless heaps of data".⁴⁹

Rozsak states, society is now based on an "information economy"; those who control information are the new power brokers.⁵⁰ Information is often referred to as a commodity. In fact in the late 20th century information was often referred to by media marketers and computer advocates as "the currency of the 90s". A political dialog has emerged about the

⁴⁷ Allucquere Stone, 'Sex and Death Among the Disembodied: VR, Cyberspace and the Nature of Academic Discourse', in *Culture of the Internet* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers and the Sociological Review, 1995), p. 244.

⁴⁸ Roszak defines ideas as "integrating patterns meant to declare the meaning of things as human beings have discovered it by way of revelation". Consult: Theodore Roszak, *The Cult of Information* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1986), p. 91.

⁴⁹ Roszak, p. 88.

⁵⁰ Roszak, p. 29.

“information rich” and “information poor” with access to the Internet becoming the new benchmark for poverty. Being connected to the Internet is considered more than an advantage; it is increasingly seen as a life necessity.

Though thousands of bits of data are accessible to the average netizen, actually locating and obtaining information is another challenge. Search engines, computer software which helps individuals conduct information searches on the Internet, such as Yahoo, Infoseek and AltaVista have helped make information more accessible. Still, the criticism that the Internet is, “a library with all the books thrown on the floor”⁵¹ often seems an accurate description. The model is often central to debates of those advocating the need for more public online access. The focus is utilitarian, promoting the most access to the most information for the most people.

THE INTERNET AS COMMON MENTAL GEOGRAPHY⁵²

The Internet as common mental geography model views the Internet as more than a technology form. The Internet provides not only tools for communication, but a structure for individuals to construct a common worldview. This can be loosely associated with Agre’s model of the “Internet as a computer system”. Here computers are identified as machines representing the world in two ways: first, as machines analysing “representational stuff at a level for which it is meaningful to people”; secondly operating on “systematic analysis of the world to which the computations are supposed to refer”.⁵³ Agre’s model sees the Internet as providing language and resources pointing to “real things in the world that the data records are suppose to represent”. Computers are meant to supply standardised methods of processing data. These processes are meant to link computer operators to a common platform of language and interactions.

This platform provides a common mental geography, a way to describe how the real world functions using computer-ese and technological imagery; the machine is used to understand humanity. This is linked to a general method of communication known as technobabble, where the “human condition is frequently explained in terms of technological metaphors”.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Heather Campbell, ‘Media Technology as Worldview: Cultural Implications of the Internet and Postmodernity’ (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1997)

⁵² Metaphoric image taken from: Benedikt, “Introduction.” in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, p. 2.

⁵³ Phil Agre, <http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_3/agre>

⁵⁴ John Barry, *Technobabble* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), p. xiii.

Technobabble involves using mechanistic language to describe human processes. This has connotations outside the realms of computing as individuals use anthropomorphic ideas, attributing human characteristics to material objects, to describe computers and their processes.

By merging technobabble with cyber-philosophy the Internet becomes a distinct way of viewing reality, the physical world interpreted through the screen. The computer becomes a model for how the brain works and the Internet becomes a metaphor for how life functions. "Frank", a junior in Computer Science at MIT expresses this,

*The Brain is a computer and the soul sort of programs... It is like a programmer and a computer. There is a harmony. A fit. The soul is sometimes sitting here at the console, at least one part of it is, and part of it is in the machine. It is continuously aware of the state of the machine and can change any part of it at any time...it's a spiritual thing which inhabits the computer.*⁵⁵

This model tends to blur elements of SF fantasy with computer networking images. Cyberspace, the world on computers, can be seen as an environment shaped as much by story and myth as it is by networked computers.

This relates to the previous section's discussion of cyberspace as non-fiction. Nunes argued that cyberspace creates a world of simulation. The world represented on screen becomes more real than the actual world. Cyberspace is seen as a real place, the place where people see themselves while "surfing the Net". The reality is that cyberspace is a simulated territory; it does not truly represent actual computer network architecture of computer connections and telephone lines. However some users choose to let fantasy inform their reality. This extreme can be seen in the lives of computer hackers. Considering hacker culture as an international phenomenon, Turkle describes hackers as individuals obsessed with their computers who often disregard their bodies and the world in which they move. Their chief aim is to engage the world through computers and technology. As one hacker whom Turkle quotes, commented,

*I have assimilated the process to the point that the computer is like an extension of my mind. Maybe my body. I see it but I don't consciously think about using it. Once I know in my mind exactly what I want to do, I can express in on a computer without much further effort.*⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, pp. 308-309.

⁵⁶ Turkle, *The Second Self*, p. 218.

The Internet as common mental geography is about sharing in a common language and view of the world, through the eyes of computer technology. Computer terminology such as “downloading”, “logging on” or “trashing a file” is transposed by computer programmers or users into every day dialog, used to describe real life function and interpersonal interaction. Immersion in the world of computers provides more than metaphors. It can lead to a greater reality. Barry says in *Technobabble*,

*In the computer cosmos, most aficionados are content to ‘evangelize’ and seek guidance of ‘gurus’. Some however, view the computer as a direct link to a higher state of consciousness and meld psychobabble and technobabble in the process.*⁵⁷

A common mental geography can evoke a mystical image of the Internet facilitating a global consciousness. In writing about the projected potential of VR to share its created reality with the physical world De Kerckhove states “VR technology would allow many minds to collectively process a kind of ‘group consciousness’”.⁵⁸ This model promotes the merging of the human mind with a machine.

While presenting a predominantly negative view of this model, this discussion would be incomplete without showing some beneficial aspects as well. Seeing the Internet as common mental geography supplies those who create computer technology, as well as users, with a common system of communication and a new meta-narrative to be used to make sense of the world. If kept in balance it can provide cohesion and a sense of social support for like-minded netizens. This model is sometimes illustrated in marketing campaigns by computer and PR professionals (example: “Where do you want to go today” by Microsoft, portraying the Internet as a realm of freedom and potential). Internet users may use this model to see the online environment as a place to find meaning and connection. It can also be used in a utopian pursuit of a “better” reality.

⁵⁷ Barry, p. 213.

⁵⁸ Derrick De Kerckhove, *The Skin of Culture* (Toronto: Somerville House Publishing, 1995), p. 47.

THE INTERNET AS AN IDENTITY WORKSHOP⁵⁹

The Internet as “identity workshop” model enables people to see the online context as a place to learn and test social skills.⁶⁰ The Internet is characterised as a space of freedom and experimentation. Individuals are able to “re-present” themselves by either highlighting certain attributes or hiding others, or by creating new persona for themselves. The focus here is on personalised use, as the Internet “has provided a forum in which users can re-create themselves”.⁶¹ Changing one’s identity online can be done easily as electronic communication is essentially blind. The Internet erases social cues so status, power and prestige are not communicated contextually or dynamically.⁶² What is seen are words on a screen with which individuals can construct both themselves and others with whose “bodies” they are communicating.

One discussion area in CMC research attempts to distinguish the real from the virtual identity online by exploring the question of “embodiment”, what the body is in cyberspace. How Internet users identify their body online can influence how they see themselves and communicate with other net users. The online context can create a separation of the human spirit from the human body. This leads to what Nunes describes as the

*Re-examination of the body as both physiological (noumenal) entity and phenomenological experience ...Internet might present a seduction rather than subduction: a challenge to modernity’s assumption of self and body, of individual and community.*⁶³

In cyberspace people are “disembodied”, detached or freed from the constraints of the physical. Online bodies are constructed through words. People present their bodies by the words they select. The body online is flexible; people can post their own words or re-post someone else’s text. Individuals dependent on information provided by online personas, raise the issue of whether or not one can “blindly” trust what is presented as text-based perceptions are difficult to verify.

⁵⁹ Terminology attributed to: Amy Bruckman, ‘Identity Workshop: Emergent social and psychological phenomena in text-based virtual reality’, at *Amy Bruckman’s Papers*, 1 (4 May 1992) accessed 1 June 1998 <<http://www.cc.gatech.edu/fac/Amy.Bruckman/papers/index.html#IW>>

⁶⁰ Malcolm Parks and Kory Floyd, ‘Making Friends in Cyberspace’, in *Journal of Communication*, 46.1 (1996), p. 83.

⁶¹ Justine Block, ‘The Internet Relationship’ in *Overland*, 143 (1996), p. 5.

⁶² Research validating such claims can be found in: Sara Kiesler, Jane Siegel and Timothy McGuire, ‘Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-mediated Communication’, in *American Psychologist*, 39.10 (October 1984), p. 125.

⁶³ Nunes, p. 327.

As an "identity workshop" the Internet gives individuals the ability to recreate their personal identities. For example, on email lists individuals receive all postings made by other members of that group. They select a message and open it, coming face-to-screen with a piece of text, most likely generated by an individual they have never met. Typically they have no access to a visual image of the individual. Social and non-verbal cues for the most part are absent. In email, individuals are portrayed as standardised computer block letters, the type-written word; it is up to the reader to construct the body of the persona they are communicating with.

In order to bridge the gap in visual cues online many have developed ways to express various emotions or moods. One common way to relay emotion is through use of "emoticons" employed to express meaning on a level deeper than words. "An emoticon is an emotional icon, or pictorial expression of the moment. These are most commonly created on one line using symbols on a keyboard".⁶⁴ Examples include:

:-) *a smiling face -viewed sideways*
:-(*an unhappy face*
;-) *a winking, smiling face*
>:-O *someone screaming in fright, hair standing on end*
:-(*) *someone about to throw up*⁶⁵

This system allows individuals to create a more complete picture of their feelings by framing communication with emotional boundaries.⁶⁶

The Internet as identity workshop can be positive. It also offers social anonymity where a user can "lurk" on a mailing list or discussion group. To lurk online means to eaves-drop or be transparent by being part of an email or online group, but not participating actively, in a sense "lurking" in the shadows of cyberspace. This is helpful to those with introverted personalities who might be inhibited in a face-to-face context. Being hidden online allows them to muster the courage to communicate and develop communication skills. Also,

⁶⁴ Katie Argyll and Rob Shields, 'Is there a Body in the Net?', in *Cultures of Internet*, ed. by Rob Shields (London: Sage Publications, 1996), p 65.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Reid, 'Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat: Construction Communities', in *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*, ed. by Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 400.

⁶⁶ It should be noted that using emoticons does not necessarily mean individuals subscribe to this model. Emoticons are a common part of online communication.

individuals who are primarily written rather than oral communicators often thrive in interactions online, finding it a medium conducive to their communication style.⁶⁷

Some see the Internet as a mecca of “multi-personality possibilities” where the Internet unties the mind from the body offering new ways of expression and opportunities for equality. This not only allows for experimentation, such as gender swapping, but also creates a space in which prejudices can be eliminated. People are judged on the basis of their text response, not their status or appearance.

While options for anonymity and the absence of social cues online allow individuals a sense of freedom, the Internet as identity workshop also produces some “bad” and even “ugly” by-products. The dissolution of boundaries can result in de-individualisation where there is “loss of identity and weakening of social norms and constraints associated with submergence in a group or a crowd”.⁶⁸ Thus, the online anonymity, which promotes equal participation within a group, can also lead to reduced self-regulation and promote uninhibited behaviour.

Anonymity and the ability to hide behind a false identity or email address have contributed to the phenomena of flaming and spamming. Flaming is the exchange of angry and often derogatory comments on a given topic usually within a discussion group. Spamming involves posting an inappropriate message on a list or sending an unsolicited message to a user (i.e. junk email). This usually occurs when an individual knowingly submits an inappropriate topic on a subject specific list or blatantly violates group protocol. Individuals physically isolated from those with whom they are communicating often feel less bound to social norms. The computer will not judge them or restrain them if they produce a rude text or “act out” online.

Another concern being voiced by pundits is how the proliferation of new information technology has facilitated a blurring of distinction between what is human and what is computer. Haraway states,

Late 20th century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally

⁶⁷ These assertions are validated through findings reported by various CMC studies. Consult: Lee Sproull and Sara Kiesler, ‘Electronic Group Dynamics’ in *Connections* (London/Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 57-77. This assertion will be substantiated in case study chapters through data gained in this research project.

⁶⁸ Spears and Lea, p. 38.

*designed and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively and we find ourselves frighteningly inert.*⁶⁹

Disembodiment creating freedom online can also lead individuals to confusion, dishonesty and deception. The Internet becomes an unsafe place where people are not to be trusted. This is expressed by Julian Dibble's classic record "A Rape in Cyberspace" where a character in a Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) hacked into another character's person to "virtually" assault her. The incident received significant media attention and showed how involvement in a fantasy-based online environment can have real world psychological and sociological effects on participants.⁷⁰ Positively, it centres on freedom and potential, wherein people are not bound by social class or physical appearance. Negatively, it creates a very egocentric view of the Internet, where individual choice dominates and undesirable social behaviour can surface.

THE INTERNET AS SOCIAL NETWORK

The Internet as social network model portrays the online context as a social space where making connections with people is the primary goal. This model focuses on relationships formed online; individuals see their main purpose for being online as to connect with others. The Internet as social network describes the Internet as a place of unlimited connections, where through a few clicks of a mouse or punches of a keyboard people find themselves in communication with others, and not just for information.

Another of Agre's models can help elaborate this concept. His model "the Internet as discourse" focuses on how system developers transform social discourses into machinery.⁷¹ Agre describes the Internet as being tied to a hermeneutic process; "as technology is used in new ways we gain deeper understanding of the ideas that motivate it". Discourses are informed by the history of a given technology as well as unarticulated assumptions about it. How individuals speak about a technology influences how it is used. As digital media eliminates limitations of the physical world, not only are uses of technology altered, but also

⁶⁹ John Bowers, 'The Politics of Formalism', in *Contexts of Computer-Mediated Communication*, ed. by Martin Lea (London: Wheatsheaf/Harvester, 1992), p. 257.

⁷⁰ See: Julian Dibble., 'A Rape in Cyberspace; or How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society', in *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*, ed. by Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 375-395.

⁷¹ Phil Agre, <http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_3/agre>

the “moral base of our rules” associated with it.⁷² The Internet as discourse allows people to use technology in new ways to build language connections with others.

From its inception the Internet had a social nature. As was referred to in the history of the Internet section, networking was not just about exchanging research data, but also about building relationships with other researchers. As the Internet grew it continued to expand as a social medium. “I was hungry for intellectual companionship as well as raw information,” said Rheingold of his motivations for going online.⁷³

Referring to the Internet as a social sphere has become a significant trend in CMC research. Steven Jones focuses much of his work around this idea and in “The Internet as a Social Landscape” describes the Internet as a “human constructed” sphere.

*Cyberspace is promoted as social space because it is made by people and thus as the ‘new public space’ it conjoins traditional mythic narratives of progress with the strong modern impulses towards self-fulfilment and personal development.*⁷⁴

Much has been written on the social nature of the Internet. Studies have found people use email and other forms of CMC to socialise, maintain relationships, play games and receive emotional support.⁷⁵ While some see online relationships as shallow and impersonal illusions, others argue the Internet liberates inter-personal relations and creates communities. As Parks and Floyd wrote, “one vision is of relationships lost, while the other is of relationships liberated and found”.⁷⁶

The Internet as social network model also has a communal orientation. It involves not just creating individual social connections, but a social web. Research into the social nature of the Net often focuses on online communities which “embody a new kind of social interaction that no one had predicted”.⁷⁷ Many people are drawn to these online relationships, as they can appear less risky than real world interactions. Justine Block in “The Internet

⁷² Phil Agre, <http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_3/agre>

⁷³ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 56.

⁷⁴ Steven Jones, ‘The Internet and its Social Landscape’, in *Virtual Culture*, ed. by Steven Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), p. 22.

⁷⁵ Parks and Floyd, p. 83.

⁷⁶ Parks and Floyd, p. 81.

⁷⁷ National Research Council, Computer Science and Telecommunications board, *Realising the Information Future-The Internet and Beyond* (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 1994)p. 30.

Relationship” stated that online people are “liberated from some of the emotional reactions they feel when meeting someone in real space”.⁷⁸

The Internet is a new public space where new rules replace traditional forms of relating, a fact appealing to many netizens. Levels of interaction can be intense and intimate in online groups with members showing a high degree of personal investment. Such is the case in MUDs where individuals have been known to interact for hours non-stop. This may be an outlet for individuals living in a depersonalised urban setting or isolated rural environment where traditional human relationships are lacking or unavailable. Online relationships lack physical connection, but not emotional attachment. So notes one individual’s response in a Usenet discussion on MUDs:

Subject: MUDS are Not just games!

*I don't care how much people say they are, muds are not just games, they are *real*!!! My mud friends are my best friends, they are the people who like me most in the entire world. Maybe the only people who do...They are my family, they are not just some game.*⁷⁹

Online communities allow individuals to select their neighbours and seek out new friends with common interests. Borders are erased as the person in the next room or on the next continent are only an email away. Rushkoff states the Internet has become a metaphor for a new model of human social interaction: “it allows for communication without limitations of time or space, personality or body, religion or nationality...a fractal approach to human consciousness”.⁸⁰

Yet the Internet as social space does have its problems. Online the veil of the screen separates individuals from each other. With freedom come complications as “communicators must imagine their audience, for at a terminal it almost seems as though the computer itself is the audience”.⁸¹ If individuals wish to move past this veiled interaction, they must reach beyond the screen. This is often a disappointing move.⁸²

⁷⁸ Block, p. 6.

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Reid, ‘Virtual Worlds: Culture and Imagination’, in *CyberSociety*, ed. by Steven Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 175.

⁸⁰ Rushkoff, p. 57.

⁸¹ Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, p. 125.

⁸² Consult: James Katz and Philip Aspden, ‘A Nation of Strangers?’, in *Communications of the ACM*, 40.12 (December 1997), pp. 81-86.

Seeing the Internet as social network also requires individuals to shift their context from individual interaction to corporate relationships. The identity of the individual becomes rooted in the identity of the community. As Turkle stated, "one's identity emerges from who one knows, one's associations and connections".⁸³ Some fear individual identity can be lost as it is absorbed in the connections the individual makes to other online groups, especially those based on creating new identities. The online self can become seemingly out of context unless it is considered part of the whole.

SUMMARY

In this section four models of the Internet have been presented, describing different conceptions of life online. Each model highlights a central value or belief about the function or nature of the Internet. The Internet as information space focuses on transfer of data; the purpose of the Internet is to provide access to information. Here the Internet is often run as a market economy where data are exchanged freely by anyone who can obtain online access. The Internet as common mental geography focuses on allowing technology to inform one's language and interaction with reality. The online context is used create a shared view of reality informing how individuals understand offline structures and practices. The Internet as identity workshop focuses on individuals' ability to create or re-create their identity online. Promoting freedom and potentiality, this model frees people from real world, physical constraints encouraging them to experiment online with new ways of being. The Internet as social network focuses on a people-centred approach to the online context. The purpose of this model is to describe social relationships formed through Internet interaction; emphasising study of social interactions and community relationship. These models are used in this study to identify how various individuals and groups understand and utilise Internet technology in relation to online communities.

RESPONSE TO THE INTERNET AND CYBERSPACE

When a new technology is created a standard spectrum of response emerges.⁸⁴ Typically there is a "honeymoon" period at its introduction where only positive advantages are seen

⁸³ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, p. 258.

⁸⁴ A helpful survey of evolution of media innovation is given by Richard Campbell in *Media and Culture*. The first phase is the "novelty or development stage" where inventors and technicians trying to solve a particular problem develop a new form of technology. The second phase is the "entrepreneurial stage" in which creators and investors determine the practical usage for the product. The third phase is the "mass-medium stage" where businesses explore large audience marketability, looking at home as well as office uses. For more details consult: Richard Campbell, *Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St Martin's Press, 2000), p. 38.

and are explored, especially by its creators and marketers. Advocates emerge to champion the product and call for its adoption. After adoption at the popular level, critics quickly emerge. These may be Luddites who rally against any form of new innovation or social critics who react to how technology may shape the social landscape. Finally, after the pendulum has swung to either extreme of supporters and opponents, a middle-of-the-road response is called forth. This process has been evident regarding the Internet. On one side are those who see the Internet leading to utopia. On the other are those who see it creating imminent dystopia. In the middle are a small number of individuals trying carefully to weigh the advantages and disadvantages they see it creating.

This section presents an overview of three dominant responses to new technology: advocates, critics and critical friends.⁸⁵ Advocates promote the Internet's ability to make the world a better place. Critics denounce the Internet, often portraying it as a de-humanising medium. Critical friends attempt to reflect on both the advantages and disadvantages introduced by Internet technology. These will be explored by both general social responses to Internet technology and those from Christian and theological sources.⁸⁶ While these may appear an oversimplification it should be noted that most technology issue debates tend to identify extremes.⁸⁷ The survey of responses is followed by a summary highlighting the position to be taken in this research study, the perspective of critical advocate standing in prophetic resistance to technological influences.

ADVOCATES

"Everything informational and important to the life of individuals...will be found for sale or for the taking in cyberspace."

-Michael Benedikt, *Cyberspace: First Steps*⁸⁸

Those who see cyberspace as utopia have been referred to as "techno-utopians" or even "Internet evangelists", attempting to boost the profile of the Internet by "raving" about it in

⁸⁵ The categories have been adopted from other sources. Similar categorisations can be found in: Gregor Goethals, 'Media Mythologies', in *Religion in the Media*, ed. by Chris Arthur (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1993). Also consult: Jolyon Mitchell, *Deconstructing Religious Stereotypes in Popular Television* (Salamanca, Spain: University Publication Pontifica of Salamanca, 2000).

⁸⁶ Initially most of what has been written by the Christian community on the Internet took the form of Christian resource manuals or Internet guidebooks. However, starting in 1997 a few voices have emerged to evaluate how the Internet might specifically affect the Christian Church, which are considered here.

⁸⁷ Point raised by: Barry Wellman, 'The Road to Utopia and Dystopia on the Information Highway', in *Contemporary Sociology*, 26 (July 1997), p. 449.

⁸⁸ Benedikt, 'Introduction' in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, p. 2.

the public sphere. Advocates often see the Internet as a communicative nirvana, a place where access to information equals freedom. Bill Gates emphasises,

*The network will draw us together, if that's what we choose, or let us scatter ourselves into a million mediated communities. Above all, and in countless new ways, the information highway will give us choices that can put us in touch with entertainment, information, and each other.*⁸⁹

Advocates are optimistic about the future. While acknowledging that the digitisation of culture may bring a downside, overall they foresee it as a positive worldwide societal development. One key document illustrative of the utopian perspective, *A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age*, sketches a picture of the influence of cyberspace on all aspects of society.⁹⁰ Its authors describe societal changes in terms of Toffler's wave theory, saying society now sits on the edge of a Third Wave economy where the central resource is "actionable knowledge" encompassing information, images, symbols, ideology and values.⁹¹ "As it emerges, it shapes new codes of behaviour that move each organism and institution—family, neighbourhood, church group, company, government, nation—inexorably beyond standardisation and centralisation."⁹² Cyberspace is described as a "wonderful pluralistic world" opening society up to new opportunities by providing "one of the main forms of glue holding together an increasingly free and diverse world".⁹³

Potential, possibility and empowerment are words often employed by advocates to speak about the Net. Advocates see the Internet as more than a tool for gathering information; they see it as a new technological revolution leading to a more just and free society. Freedom of information is a right proliferated by many hackers and groups such as crypto-anarchists, who say "information should be free" to anyone with computer access and technical know-how and advocate breaking down governmental monopoly of information.⁹⁴ In the "Crypto-Anarchist Manifesto", Timothy May says freedom is inevitable as technology provides wire

⁸⁹ Gates, p. 274.

⁹⁰ Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth and Alvin Toffler, 'A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age', in *New Perspectives*, 12 (1994), pp. 26-38.

⁹¹ Wave theory comes from Alvin Toffler's book *Future Shock* and describes technology-economics in society in terms of waves not noting technological changes along with social trends. The First Wave economy, or agricultural revolution, holds land and farm labour as the main factors of production. In the Second Wave economy the Industrial Revolution becomes "massified" around machines and larger industries.

⁹² Dyson, Gilder, Keyworth and Toffler, p. 30

⁹³ Dyson, Gilder, Keyworth and Toffler, p. 28.

⁹⁴ Dorothy Denning, 'Concerning Hackers who break into Computer Systems', in *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*, ed. by Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 141.

clippers to old barriers around intellectual property rights. “Arise, you have nothing to lose but your barb wire fences.”⁹⁵

Christian advocates, such as British researcher Patrick Dixon, characterise the Internet as a place of opportunity and challenge for the Church. Dixon’s book *Cyberchurch* outlines possible applications of Internet technology within the church, giving a general, though often shallow, critique of the Internet’s influence on church and relationships within society. Dixon sees the Internet as a “God-given means of proclamation and explanation”. He argues the Great Commission includes cyberspace.

*The Internet world needs cyberchurch, not as a substitute for local church life, but as a vibrant electronic expression of the life found in the body of Christ worldwide... We cannot fulfil the great Commission to go into all the world if we stay out of the cyberworld.*⁹⁶

Dixon advocates that the Church embrace Internet technology. He characterises Paul as the first “cyberapostle” whose use of the technology of his day (pen, ink and letter writing) enabled him to be virtually present in different churches as well as eras, an approach the Church should take today. His enthusiastic support is tempered with a hint of caution saying a “clear call from God”⁹⁷ should be sought before incorporating the Internet into church life, and stresses the cyberchurch is no substitute for real-life membership and involvement.⁹⁸ Yet his tone is notably positive, even that of a cheerleader at times.

Christian advocates encourage participation in Internet technology as part of the divine mandate to “preach the gospel to every living creature”. Walt Wilson in *The Internet Church*, focuses on how the Church should utilise the Internet for the task of world evangelism. Wilson asserts the church is on a divine destiny, and depicts the Internet as a prophetic tool for realising this great commission. He sees the Internet as empowered by God for His purposes as he states “He is here with us in this moment of history, this information age, equipping us and empowering us for the creation of the Internet church”.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Timothy May, ‘A Crypto-Anarchist Manifesto’, in *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*, ed. by Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1996), p. 239.

⁹⁶ Patrick Dixon, *Cyberchurch, Christianity and the Internet* (Eastborne: Kingsway Publications, 1997), p. 162.

⁹⁷ Dixon, p. 162.

⁹⁸ Dixon, p. 94.

⁹⁹ Walter Wilson, *The Internet Church* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000,) p. 120.

Advocates highly value the opportunities created by the Internet and individual freedom. This position is summed up by Gates: "The information highway is going to break down boundaries and may even promote a world culture..."¹⁰⁰ Advocates seek to convert sceptics by demonstrating the Internet has power to make the world a better place. It is also important to note many of them have a vested interest in the Internet due to business or research investments. Advocates see the Internet as a communicative utopia potentially eliminating prejudices, freeing people from the constraints of geography, creating new possibilities for communication. Christian advocacy of the Internet is about more than promoting technology use; it also addresses using a tool of God for His manifest purposes.

CRITICS

"Any concept which entails people enhancing their humanity from the example of a synthetic machine is morally ugly."

- Michael Shallis, *The Silicon Idol*¹⁰¹

Some view the Internet not as a road bringing humanity together, but as a path separating individuals. These critics, seeing the Internet as a threat to "real" community and communication, tend to rant about the weakness of technology they see most people overlooking or brushing over. By their nature critics stress perceived disadvantages believing communication mediated by the screen erodes the ability to communicate "face-to-face", stressing that the value of human interaction is in its rooted-ness to "authentic community".

One outspoken opponent is Clifford Stoll, author of *The Cuckoo's Egg*, about the uncovering of a computer spy ring in 1989, and *Silicon Snake Oil*, a treatise on the "darker side of the information superhighway". Stoll questions "inflated claims" about the Internet, arguing,

*Electric communication is an instantaneous and illusionary contact that creates a sense of intimacy without the emotional investment that leads to close friendship.*¹⁰²

Stoll believes computers blur the lines between synthetic and real life. Lack of physical and social cues ultimately will lead to shallower forms of interaction between people. Critics see themselves as reality advocates, challenging users that "the real world is far more interesting,

¹⁰⁰ Gates, p. 263.

¹⁰¹ Michael Shallis, *The Silicon Idol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 173.

¹⁰² Clifford Stoll, *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p. 24.

far more important, far richer, than anything you'll ever find on a computer screen".¹⁰³ They also stress the Internet is leading to the proliferation of misinformation as online "answers are less important than the process of discovery".¹⁰⁴ Trusting the accuracy and completeness of the data, Stoll claims, is misguided as people are often "relying on information of unknown pedigree and dubious quality, since little on the Internet has been refereed or reviewed".¹⁰⁵

Critiques come in varying degrees, from guarded apprehension to confrontational approaches. Technology and society writer Langdon Winner offers a cautious approach to the Internet, strongly critiquing the *Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age* calling it an "optimistic embrace of technological determinism".¹⁰⁶ Winner's concern is with the ends to which technology is being utilised and wonders whether online access to information will lead to a "decline in habits of sociability". Winner is not afraid people will reject all human company in favour of online interaction, but:

*What worries me is that people will begin to employ networked computing as they already use televisions, as a way of 'staying in touch' while avoiding direct contact in the public world. The basic question is how will we regard ourselves and others in a wide range of technically mediated settings.*¹⁰⁷

Lecturer in literature at UC-San Diego, Mark Slouka, however, offers a stronger critique. Blatantly attacking utopians, he proclaims the unifying power of digital communication is misleading, even dangerous. Slouka says claims made about the Internet's ability to liberate the masses and usher in a better standard of living were also made about the automobile, radio and TV. Technology, he feels, has not necessarily improved quality of life. He states, "despite the liberating wonders of *telenovela*, piped water remains a dream for million".¹⁰⁸ By trying to counter-balance hype surrounding the Internet he presents cyberspace as a dystopian landscape.

Tal Brooke, director of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP) in California, offers an example of a critical Christian response to the Internet. In *Virtual Gods*, he argues virtual reality and the Internet will lead "towards the spiritual landscape" similar to that before the

¹⁰³ Stoll, p. 12.

¹⁰⁴ Stoll, p. 124.

¹⁰⁵ Stoll, p. 125.

¹⁰⁶ Langdon Winner, 'Technology today: utopia or distopia?', in *Social Research*, 64 (1997), pp. 989-1018.

¹⁰⁷ Winner, pp. 989-1018.

great flood in Genesis where “man creates his own universe with no god in it but himself”.¹⁰⁹ Describing the Internet as a “mechanical beast” and the global computer networking as the Tower of Babel, Brooke sees cyberspace as a breeding ground for delusion, “the worst kind of alienation—from reality and from God”.¹¹⁰ As people are encouraged to hide from reality and play God they encounter the “folly of Eden”, a state of being both naked and ashamed.¹¹¹

Similarly, Brooks Alexander, founder of SCP, identifies what he calls “instrumental Gnosticism” in the techno-culture where illusionary forms of knowledge exist and are encouraged, as reality is mediated through new media technology. His essay “Virtuality and Theophobia” states,

*The spiritual world is the techno-world intersected in the media... Aberrant spiritual ideas flourish readily in that realm of collective fantasy. As the media reduce all events to info-tainment, the line between interpreting reality and inventing it starts to blur in the popular mind.*¹¹²

Brooke and Alexander argue artificial reality created by cyberspace introduces problematic practices and conceptions of reality for those seeking to live by “biblical truths”. Cyberspace turns not only into a place to separate body from spirit, but it becomes a “spiritual bomb shelter” or “refuge from God”¹¹³ as boundaries between the “personal self and the ultimate reality” begin to blur. They suggest Christians approach technology from a perspective of “sanctified cynicism”, meaning they hold a “realistic, clear-eyed view of the fallen world without succumbing to the bleak despair that normally accompanies such knowledge”.¹¹⁴ Yet, their approach seems to stray towards the extreme, which they say must be resisted. Other Christian writers offer critical response, with less fervour, such as *Hidden Dangers of the Internet* investigating the dangers of Internet pornography.¹¹⁵

Critics value reality and real world relationships. They see the online world as an artificial world that poses a threat to what it means to function as a human and portray the Internet as a space of control and manipulation, where deception is rampant. Some advocate a Luddite

¹⁰⁸ Mark Slouka, *War of the Worlds-Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 91.

¹⁰⁹ Tal Brooke, ‘Virtual Gods, Designer Universes’, in *Virtual Gods*, ed. by Tal Brooke (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1997), p. 126.

¹¹⁰ Tal Brooke., ‘Lost in the Garden of Digital Delights’, in *Virtual Gods*, p. 176.

¹¹¹ Tal Brooke, ‘Technology and the Fall’, in *Virtual Gods*, p. 181.

¹¹² Brooks Alexander. “Virtuality and Theophobia” in *Virtual Gods*, p. 162.

¹¹³ Alexander, p. 168.

¹¹⁴ Tal Brooke, ‘The Other Half’, in *Virtual Gods*, p. 188.

position where all forms of new technology are abandoned. Others advocate utilisation within the bounds of scepticism. Their position is summed up by Michael Shallis who wrote in *The Silicon Idol*, "It is a technology that springs from motives of power from a militaristic/industrial base with intentions to pervert truth, and to subjugate the population".¹¹⁶ Critics seeking to shatter the myths of that technology will make the world a better place, often in a reactionary manner. Critics in the Christian community evaluate the Internet not only as a tool, but also as a carrier of spiritual doctrines and ideas. Their critique leans heavily on how dangerous the technology is for believers' relationships with God and the Church.

CRITICAL FRIENDS

"Technology should be embraced...but with care and scepticism."
-Jeffery Young on Technorealism¹¹⁷

While technophiles rave and technophobes rant, others offer "reflection" as an approach.¹¹⁸ These individuals see technology as neither evil nor a way to societal salvation. Choosing to analyse where the information age may be taking society, they encourage people to consider how the specific technology might shape their lives. Nardi and O'Day use the label of "critical friend" as an alternative response emerging between dystopian and technophile perspectives. They see this school of thinking as attempting to address "different ways of doing and being that emerge with technological change".¹¹⁹ For this reason this category of responses will be referred to as "critical friends".

Critical friends consider both positive and negative Internet influences focusing on identifying how a given technology affects individual, community and social-political structures. They suggest individuals embrace technology with caution. By rejecting oversimplified misconceptions, which either glorify or vilify, critical friends invite critical scrutiny of the information revolution.

¹¹⁵ Gregory L. Jantz, *Hidden Dangers of the Internet: Using It Without Abusing It* (Wheaton, IL:Harold Shaw Publications, 1998)

¹¹⁶ Shallis, p. 169.

¹¹⁷ Jeffery Young, 'Technorealists Hope to Enrich Debate Over Policy Issues in Cyberspace', in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (3 April 1998), p. A23.

¹¹⁸ Reference to "reflection" as a middle ground perspective is taken from: Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), p. 155.

¹¹⁹ Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day, *Information Ecologies-Using Technology with Heart* (Cambridge, MA:The MIT Press,1999), p. 27.

The best example of this is a movement known as “Technorealism”. This ideology was birthed through a lunch meeting of David Shenk, author of *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*, and Andrew Shapiro, a fellow at Harvard Law school, while discussing what the middle ground between neo-luddism and techno-utopianism might be. “There isn’t a word for someone who is very enthusiastic about Technology, but is also very concerned about aspects of technology,” explained Shenk.¹²⁰ This school of cyber-thought evolved through email messages exchanged between friends calling themselves “a new generation of cultural critics”.¹²¹ The *Technorealism Manifesto*¹²² went public in 1998 when it was launched on the web.

The authors recognised the importance of considering the biases of various technologies and allowing individuals “to seek out those that reflect our values and aspirations”. Their goal “is neither to champion or dismiss technology, but rather to understand it and apply it in a manner more consistent with basic human values”.¹²³ Technorealism is based on eight shared principles:

- 1) *Technologies are not neutral;*
- 2) *The Internet is revolutionary, but not Utopian;*
- 3) *Government has an important role to play on the electronic frontier;*
- 4) *Information is not knowledge;*
- 5) *Wiring the schools will not save them;*
- 6) *Information wants to be protected;*
- 7) *The public owns the airwaves, the public should benefit from their use; and*
- 8) *Understanding technology should be an essential component of global citizenship.*¹²⁴

The manifesto emphasises technology is not value neutral; its creators, governmental controllers and users all contribute to the value-shaping process. Technology brings with it both opportunity and responsibility.¹²⁵ The purpose of the manifesto is to enrich debate without taking sides on specific policy issues. Individuals are encouraged to electronically sign their name to the manifesto online if the ideas expressed resonate with their beliefs. The key idea is a balanced consideration of the benefits as well as the hazards of technology. Shapiro describes Technorealists as,

¹²⁰ Young, p. A24.

¹²¹ ‘Technorealism: get real! A manifesto from a new generation of cultural critics’, in *The Nation*, 6 April 1998, p. 19.

¹²² Technorealism. 21 June 1999 <<http://technorealism.org>>

¹²³ ‘Technorealism: get real! A manifesto from a new generation of cultural critics’, p. 19.

¹²⁴ Detailed exposition on each principal found at: Technorealism <<http://technorealism.org>>

¹²⁵ Similarly put by Cereal (Matthew Lillard) in *Hackers*. “Truce you guys, we have a higher purpose here, a wake-up call from the Nintendo Generation, ‘we demand free access to data/information’. Well it comes with some responsibility!”

*We're just trying to inject more critical perspective into the debate about how new technologies are affecting our lives. If there was one word that summarises all of this it's balance.*¹²⁶

To some their response seems so simple it has been dismissed as naïve, as one critic, Steven Levy, said in "Glorifying the Obvious",

*What pledges to be a new and useful movement is somewhat of a hedge, and something of redundancy. Though well intentioned, Technorealism is dangerously close to what it warns against: another Internet hype.*¹²⁷

He goes on to say that it is fine to create a common-sense manifesto, but to declare oneself a "realist in a field that literally remakes reality"¹²⁸ is not only ironic, but also futile. While their claims may seem obvious, Technorealists provide a necessary articulation of an objective approach to the Internet. The movement has received criticism as "hype", yet its emergence shows the need for broad critiques of technology.

Within the Christian community Denver Seminary theologian Douglas Groothuis endeavours to offer a balanced critique. In *The Soul in Cyberspace* he calls his efforts an attempt at "reflection", while admitting a tendency to "include more rant than rave" about cyberspace technology.¹²⁹ He tries to employ what he calls "principles of discernment" which are neither "digitopian nor Luddite" stating, "given the present tendency to worship technology, some negativity is necessary in order to bring some balance. In this sense, being negative is positive".¹³⁰ He questions such innovations as hypertext and how this will influence authorial intent and what this will mean for Christians who are "people of the book".

Groothuis also seeks to evaluate the Internet on a spiritual level, calling for the Christian community to ask if the Internet is an appropriate medium for the Christian message. He says the Church must question the seemingly inevitable trends towards cyberspace evangelism and cyberchurch. One of his concerns is the "disembodied" communication the Internet facilitates. As he said in a *Christianity Today* interview,

¹²⁶ Young, p. A23.

¹²⁷ Steven Levy, 'Glorifying the Obvious', in *Newsweek*, 30 March 1998, p. 74.

¹²⁸ Levy, p. 74.

¹²⁹ Groothuis, p. 155.

¹³⁰ Groothuis, p. 155.

*When cyberspace begins to replace embodied interaction, we fail to honour the incarnational nature of Christianity. We may be 'connected' to people around the world through the Internet while we neglect our spouses, neighbours and churches. This is wrong.*¹³¹

Groothuis argues all technologies extensively alter human forms of life and sees cyberspace technology as affecting “our souls and our society”.¹³² He challenges Christians to ponder how it may affect both spiritual destiny and relationship with God, as well as earthly lifestyle.

Graham Houston also takes a critical friend approach, focusing on ethical issues surrounding virtual reality. In *Virtual Morality* he seeks to define a Christian ethical interface between technology and postmodernity. Houston argues for a “Virtual Morality” contextualised as “ethical principals and moral stances may reflect our perceptions of the nature of reality, so a paradigm shift may take place when we enter a virtual world”.¹³³ In an age of simulation where reality is broken down into images, Christians who interact with VR are caught in a tension between affirming the *imago Dei* or creating a new “sense of centred selfhood”.¹³⁴ This, he believes, can be addressed through an ethical framework of “Christian realism” which presupposes that the moral order is the created order and technological determinism is not necessary.¹³⁵ Houston encourages Christians to engage with discernment, so they can inform the technology rather than letting it inform their worldview.

Critical friends value critical discussion about technology. They portray the Internet as a microcosm of society; cyberspace is a place of empowerment and limitation. Critical friends promote open-minded reflection and public debate about social and policy issues related to technology. Their position, summed up in the Technorealist manifesto, is “The development that unfolds each day in communication and computing can be thrilling and disorienting...Are these changes good or bad? The answer is both”.¹³⁶ Critical friends seek to provide a middle ground position of balance. Being a Christian and a critical advocate of technology means identifying how technology influences society and individuals’ beliefs and values as well as behaviour and lifestyle. It is about being friendly and familiar with the technology itself, while being critical of the path down which it is allowed to lead.

¹³¹ Mark Kellner, ‘Losing our Souls in cyberspace: Douglas Groothuis on the virtues and vices of virtual reality’, in *Christianity Today*, 1 September 1997, p. 54.

¹³² Groothuis, p. 15.

¹³³ Graham Houston, *Virtual Morality* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), p. 59.

¹³⁴ Houston, p. 185.

¹³⁵ Houston, p. 183.

This section has considered three reactions to Internet technology. Advocates promote the Internet's ability to make the world a better place, either for ideological reasons or personal benefits. Critics attack the image of the Internet as a "promised land", arguing it is a de-humanising medium. Critical friends respond to both extremes, trying to add balance to the debate. A Christian response to technology extends this evaluation to consider how technology affects and shapes the soul. These labels are useful in this project to identify positions and biases of various researchers and Internet users. The critical advocate approach is being taken in this thesis, with both advantages and disadvantages created by technology noted in each online community case study.

SUMMARY: APPROACHING THE INTERNET

Chapter two has sought to tell the story of the Internet and cyberspace, by investigating both historical developments and ideological roots. The purpose has been to demonstrate how this background information shapes people's definitions, reactions to, and engagement with the online environment. The Internet is defined as the "network of all connected networks", an access tool for connecting to computer networks. Yet, it is more than a communication tool. Besides information, it transports ideas and values about the online and offline world. Internet technology is a social gateway providing hope to re-build and sustain communications in the face of destructive forces, such as military or societal breakdown. It promotes faith in progress and freedom of information, and is seen as a key for the betterment of society.

While the Internet provides the hardware and structure of the online world, cyberspace holds its meta-narrative, mingling bits of science fiction fantasy with symbolic language to create a picture of a new technological "promised land". Cyberspace is defined as a metaphorical space behind the computer screen, laden with distinct interpretations of what is real and what is virtual in the technological world. The concept of cyberspace is used both in mythical and utilitarian ways. As fiction it empowers technology with the potential to create a new world. As non-fiction it creates metaphors, images of the highway and web, to describe this new reality as an actual space. The Internet and cyberspace become a reality laboratory, computer networks become spaces for envisioning a more hopeful future by exploring new ways of communicating and being.

¹³⁶ Technorealism <<http://technorealism.org>>

In order to encapsulate these ideas of how the Internet is seen to function, four descriptive models were presented. Each model focused on different conceptions of the primary purpose of the Internet. While all four have a useful place in this project, the Internet as Social Network, which advocates a people-centred approach to technology, will be the central model used. This model provides a framework to describe the Internet as social sphere and concentrate on investigating how people utilise it to build relationships online. A spectrum of responses to Internet technology, from advocates, critics and critical friends, has also been provided as tools for evaluation in future chapters. A critical advocate's approach, considering both positive and negative influences of the Internet, is taken in this thesis when evaluating Internet technology and innovations.

Recognising the story of the Internet and cyberspace helps identify what some have referred to as cyber-culture, various practices and traits of online life. This chapter has prepared the ground for bringing together understandings of community and the online context in chapter three, focusing on the online community and online Christianity.

CHAPTER 3

ONLINE COMMUNITY AND ONLINE CHRISTIANITY

INTRODUCTION

“Emile Durkheim (sic)...called the premodern kind of social group gemeinschaft, which is closer to the English word community, and the new kind of social group he called gesellschaft, which can be translated roughly as society. All questions about community in cyberspace point to a similar kind of transition that might be taking place now, for which we have no technical names.”

*-Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*¹*

Having explored ideas foundational to concepts about community, the Internet and cyberspace, attention is now turned to what comes forth when these ideas merge. The virtual or online community refers to groupings formed through Internet technology having a relational focus. The term “virtual community” is most often attributed to Howard Rheingold and his book *The Virtual Community, Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, where he describes his experiences with an email computer conference called the WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectorinic Link) in the San Francisco Bay area in the mid-1980s. Rheingold looks at online culture and its potential to build new forms of community by examining critically his own engagement and “emotional attachment to an apparently bloodless technological ritual”.² His study opened up discussion of the promises and problems arising when humanity begins to create relationships through global computer networks. According to Rheingold the online community is about the human side of cyberspace, a new forum for human interaction in a technological world.

Discussions in chapter one raised the possibility of going beyond traditional understandings of community, to consider communities as groups not tied to geography or tightly-bound relationships. The online environment presents new ways of interacting and sustaining relations, thus relating to a Social Network conception of community. Chapter two’s survey of cyberspace and the Internet described the online context as a new space of potentially positive experimentation with relationships and identity. Cyberspace is identified as a metaphoric space enabling new models of relationships and ways of being to emerge. Ideas

¹ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 64.

² Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 1.

presented in these two chapters laid the groundwork necessary for discussion of online community.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a picture of online community by describing how it functions and then to define Christian online community, the focus of this study. First, online community is explored from its historical and ideological roots, with specific types of online groups being identified. Issues related to “virtual” aspects of the online community are also discussed. Secondly, a survey of cyber-spirituality is presented, to see what are the dominant religious and spiritual ideas found online. Thirdly, various manifestations of online Christianity are spotlighted, with special emphasis placed on the online Christian community.

THE ONLINE COMMUNITY

“Information age hunters and gatherers were lone wolves until we found the net.”
-Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*³

For many, the Internet has become more than an information technology; it is a way of connecting people. While technology is said to separate people, as machines mediate flesh-and-blood relationships, the Internet is seen as a tool re-uniting people. This perspective shifts emphasis from a mechanistic information-centred model of the Internet to a people or relationship-centred model. Introduced in chapter two as a social network, this conceptual model allows Internet portrayal as a space extending humanity’s ability to form community bonds. This section highlights the Internet’s ability to connect groups of people through online relationships referred to as online communities.

A people-centred view of the Internet is voiced by Howard Rheingold, the most cited proponent and philosopher of the “virtual community”, who became involved in the WELL computer conferencing system as editor of the *Whole Earth Review*. He described the experience as finding a new home. Rheingold coined the term “virtual community” to refer to those groups of persons who establish and retain contact via computer-mediated communication (CMC). Specifically, he defined it as,

³ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 56.

*Social aggregations that 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.*⁴

Rheingold's definition concentrates on relationship formation through the act of creating and sustaining online conversations with people who have emotional investment within the group they are communicating with. Other definitions stress virtual communities are social spaces, places of electronic gathering. Emphasis is put on common collections through common connections, defined by Stone as,

*Social spaces in which people still meet face-to face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face'.... [V]irtual communities [are] passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that unite people who were physically separate.*⁵

The term "virtual community" is used to distinguish these online relationships from community bonds existing in the real world. It is understood that being technologically maintained through the Internet makes them virtual, while being people-centred groups makes them a community.

The word "virtual" points back to chapter two's discussion of reality versus the un-real as expressed in VR technology and science fiction. Calling an online group a "virtual" community tends to imply it is based on something false. Distinguishing what is real from what is virtual in an online community will be discussed more in-depth later in this section. However, from this point onward preference will be given to the term "online community" or Internet communities over the label "virtual community".

In this section development and characteristics of the online community are described. First, a brief survey of the historical development of the online community is given. Secondly, the types of online communities existing on the Internet are described. Thirdly, the question "What is real and what is virtual?" in the online community will be asked in order to compare and contrast it to other "real world" forms of community.

⁴ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 5.

⁵ Allucquere Stone quoted in: Steven Jones, 'Understanding Community in the Information Age', in *CyberSociety* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995),p 19.

DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE COMMUNITY

It has been that argued the emergence of the online community was not simply a by-product of networking, but an out-working of ideas fostering growth of the Internet. Rheingold suggests in *The Virtual Community*,

*The people who built CMC systems wanted to have a large population of people to communicate with; the value they sought was not the value of metering access to the community, but in intellectual values, the collective goods, that a community could create together.*⁶

The community aspect of online communications in many respects emerged soon after ARPANET went online in 1969. While ARPANET was not intended to be a message system, electronic mail (email) soon dominated network use. According to Hafner and Lyons,

*Email was to the ARPANET what the Louisiana Purchase was to the young United States. Things only got better as the network grew and technology converged with the torrential tendency to talk.*⁷

The development of email and mailing lists played a significant role in transforming the Internet from research space to social sphere. Paul Salus writes, "It was news and mail that directly caused the increase in Internet use. These were the applications that began to drive the Internet".⁸

Email is a form of correspondence exchanged through computer-mediated networks facilitated through various software and service providers. The birth of email can be traced to 1970 when Ray Tomlison successfully sent the first email between two machines at Bolt, Beranek and Newman (BBN) laboratory. Although it was a simple experiment, and "in technical terms Tomlison's program was trivial, culturally it was revolutionary".⁹ The mail program was adapted and given to other servers on the ARPA network. The need for researchers to communicate was vital for their work so "the advent of distant connectivity, the notion of computer mediated communication with someone on another computer was a

⁶ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 103.

⁷ Hafner and Lyon, p. 189. The Louisiana Purchase involved the American Government purchasing territories west of the Mississippi River from the French Government, more than doubling the territory owned by the USA at that time.

⁸ Salus, p. 152.

⁹ Hafner and Lyon, p. 191.

popular one”.¹⁰ By 1973 a study found three-quarters of all traffic on ARPANET was email.¹¹

The communication exchange and potential through email on the network was revolutionary. A hundred pages could be as easily transmitted as one line. The ARPANET mail system was intended to facilitate research activities, yet users quickly saw email was a fast and easy way to communicate with co-workers. Correspondence quickly became group conversations as mail and news became the primary motivations for network use. However, mail volume soon began to strain the system. Trying to implement standardised headings and compatible protocols on the network generated even more email discussions. Finally, the glut of network traffic became the springboard for creation of mailing lists.

In 1975 an ARPANET manager, Steve Walker, announced formation of “an electronic discussion group...to develop a sense of what is mandatory, what is nice and what is not desirable in a message service”.¹² This became the first Message Service Group (MsgGroup). Individuals on the network were invited to join this moderated group, with members receiving daily posts from others on the list. Throughout the 1970s MsgGroup remained a dominant forum for conversations linking researchers. Developers also foresaw how email would become “the rule for remote collaboration”.¹³ On the MsgGroup flaming, fiery and often abusive forms of dialogue, and emoticons, punctuation meant to represent human gestures and facial expressions, first emerged.¹⁴ The social and communicative potential of the net continued to expand and by the late 1970s, other unsanctioned groupings began to arise on ARPANET. One of the first popular unofficial lists was SF-LOVERS, for those wanting public discourse on science fiction.¹⁵ Other speciality non-research related message groups continued to surface and as Rheingold stated, “It is to the credit of the top ARPA managers that they allowed virtual communities to happen, despite pressure to reign in the netheads when they seemed to be having too much fun”.¹⁶

In the 1970s another form of online community emerged on the UNIX network Usenet. “Newsgroups” began as a simple program written around 1979 at the University of North

¹⁰ Salus, p. 96.

¹¹ Hafner and Lyon, p. 194.

¹² Hafner and Lyon, p. 200.

¹³ Hafner and Lyon, p. 214.

¹⁴ Hafner and Lyon, p. 215 and 217-218.

¹⁵ Hafner and Lyon, p. 201.

¹⁶ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 77.

Carolina (UNC). The initial newsgroup focused on discussing version 7 of the UNIX system “partly as an exercise in learning details of the new system and partly to fill an administrative need”. Soon this rudimentary new system allowed people to post articles to multiple newsgroups to which they could subscribe. Usenet newsgroups began by linking UNC and Duke, but in 1980 were distributed freely on the UNIX system. By the mid-1980s dozens of institutions all over the world were utilising Usenet. The potential for connecting with others evolved from a simple work related tool to a social phenomenon.

The first newsgroups were net.general and net.v7bugs, but soon other non-systems related groups were created such as net.jokes.¹⁷ Numerous moderated and un-moderated groups emerged supervised by site administrators. In 1986 the issue of censorship emerged when request for a news group on drugs (net.rec.drugs) and one on cooking called gourmand were rejected. This led to a series of discussions from which an “alternative” or “alter” system category for news groups emerged, beginning with alt.drugs and alt.gourmand. The “alternative” hierarchy caught on quickly and soon other categories were developed, such as “comp” for computer and “rec” for hobbies.

By 1990 Usenet was carrying numerous newsgroups in a dozen or more categories, though most were primarily accessible only on UNIX systems. The advent of personal computer networks allowed the general public to gained access to forums of networked groups known as Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs). Running on public-domain software and IBM or similar systems, individuals could post messages on electronic spaces that functioned like a bulletin board.¹⁸ Technological developments in the 1980s dropped prices on modems and enabled more people to utilise BBSs. University and industrial computer centres became storage houses for these online groups. It was through harnessing computer networking’s abilities that news and discussion groups emerged and became “what the popular press calls a ‘virtual community’ based on the Internet”.¹⁹

This brief survey has shown that the online community has been a dynamically forming phenomenon, starting as a by-product of communication technology and becoming a prime motivator for computer networking growth. Various forms of technology giving rise to online community groups, are considered next.

¹⁷ Salus, p. 140.

¹⁸ Ceruzzi, p. 298.

¹⁹ Ceruzzi, p. 298.

TYPES OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

When computer technology enabled users to log on to remote computer systems, transfer files and send communications in new social ways, networking technologies became social groups. In order to understand the nature of online community various groupings must be defined. Newsgroups, BBSs and email lists along with MUDs and MOOs, Inter-relay Chat (IRC) communities, and chat rooms will be described.

Newsgroups and BBSs are housed in central computer databases. Some are open to the general public for participation, while others are specialised groups enabling public reading, but only subscribed members are able to post messages. These groups cover broad subjects allowing individuals to discuss anything from how to remove a tick properly to debates about Derrida. Newsgroups and BBSs are often group conversations in which individuals log on, read and respond to messages posted by other participants. Messages are left for public readings in the order posted. Since these groups are topic specific they often gather a loyal core of people with passionate views on the given subject who discuss and debate their views in this forum. Each BBS or newsgroup is unique in the rules of conduct and exceptions set for its group. It is commitment to the discussion topic which keeps individuals logging on, reading and participating.

Email-based lists are considered the simplest forms of online communities. They often exist as a distribution list, where an individual constructs a personal list of email addresses and sends messages to the specific group. Recipients of the post are able to respond to the original sender (by selecting “reply”) or to the entire list (by selecting “reply all”). While beginning as what Wellman would call an “ego-centred” network, a group brought together around the focus of one common contact person, this type of correspondence can easily evolve into a group discussion. The most common type of email-based community is an email list facilitated through software programs such as Lyris or Majordomo. An individual creates the group through one of these programs, and particular facets of the list such as dealing with subscribers and message traffic are often regulated through a general computer command system. These groups can be moderated, so all posts are filtered through a specific person or persons before release to the entire list, or un-moderated, where the list is created but then left on its own to run and form. Email-based communities are message systems where people gather around a specific topic. Not all email lists can be considered online communities as they may serve as news bulletins or information dissemination tools, where

posts are sent to a specific undisclosed list of people but interaction between subscribers is limited or non-existent. What makes these groups communities is the ability to contact and interact with others on this list, either through posting a personal message to the entire group or being informed of who the other subscribers are so they can be contacted through personal email for discussions.

Multi-User Dungeons/Dimension (MUDs) are cyberspace role-playing games, first developed in England in the 1980s. The origins of this name and functions of these groups are based on the fantasy game Dungeons and Dragons, where players create a character (wizard, monster, etc) and under specific rules and guidelines act out roles in created reality. MUDs can be text or image-based where individuals interact in a simulated environment. Ranging from medieval fantasy realms to cyber-cafes individuals select a sex and create an identity for their character. These “alter egos” are able to interact simultaneously with other characters. These are similar to *MOOs (Multi-user Object Oriented)* which often also have an image-based component. These are considered communities, as there is often a steady stream of frequent and consistent visitors to these spaces. People develop standards of behaviour based on the characters they present; many people establish specific relationships and even virtual marriages or partnerships.

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) combines features of conversation and writing. It allows individuals to “talk” with each other by typing in a message while simultaneously receiving responses from others logged on. Messages, appearing immediately as they are typed, are entered on a split screen. This two-way asynchronous interaction gives participants the feeling of carrying on a conversation or chat, hence the name. IRC channels are found on a number of server systems such as the Undernet. IRC groups, like other online groups, become communities as they generate a loyal base of support and commitment from their members. IRC groups may be open forums which daily have a certain time period that becomes a rallying point for participants, or they may be groups which have a weekly time slot which they are committed to. There are two unique markers in this type of community: systems of symbolism and textual significance devised to communicate certain nuances and ideas, and shared rules of “netiquette” which establish group behaviour standards.²⁰

²⁰ An in-depth analysis of IRC community formation and behaviour can be found in Elizabeth Reid, ‘Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat: Construction Communities’, in *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*, pp. 397-411.

Chat rooms employ similar technology to IRC, providing synchronous communication between logged on members. The difference between the two is that chat rooms are typically informal “live talk” sessions, where steady streams of visitors often stop in for online conversation. Many of these are hosted on web sites and can be a general social forum or revolve around a particular subject, which is the focus of the web site it is connected to. Some chat rooms are “members only”, meaning individuals must register their details before they are allowed to participate. Chat rooms, like IRC channels, are communal as they often create shared standards and expectations of communication among a core group of committed participants.

While online communities can take a variety of forms, how and why each technology is utilised to structure these groups is often similar. Online communities involve people gathering around a specific topic or purpose, with a level of commitment to that topic or purpose and each other. Returning to Rheingold’s definition, an online group becomes a community when core groups of people “carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships”. Issues of emotional investment and the how “webs of personal relationships” are formed are investigated more closely in chapters five, six and seven where specific online community case studies are explored.

In this research project, the term “online community” is defined as groups utilising various forms of technology for two-way interaction, be it asynchronous such as an email list or conference or synchronous such as IRC or chat rooms. Web sites themselves are not considered online communities, as they are typically broadcasting tools for information. Web sites may support an online community, such as hosting a chat room. They can also link to online communities by providing information on specific groups or serving as archives for email posts. Use of the label online community also denotes members have a significant level of investment in the group, not just in terms of time commitment, but in intellectual, emotional or spiritual investment. Commitment to or reliance on an online community is worrisome to many psychologists and Internet critics. This is looked at more closely in the next section.

WHAT IS “REAL” AND WHAT IS “VIRTUAL” IN ONLINE COMMUNITY

In the early 1990s a heated debate began on the validity of online groups as communities, focusing on a crucial question posed by Rheingold: “What is ‘real’ and what is ‘virtual’ in

the ‘virtual community’?” This question provoked reaction from both critics and advocates on the issue of online social relationships. Many critics assumed there was something false or at best incomplete about them. Advocates argued online communities represent a new reality, though are not completely separated from the “real world”. By mid-1990s the discussions in CMC research shifted from debate on the validity of online groups to acceptance of them as a new manifestation of community having specific implications for society. Researchers turned from the question “Are they communities?” to “What kind of communities are they?”. Referring to these groups as virtual communities was considered problematic for the validity and study of the groups. By the end of the 1990s most researchers opted for the label of online communities to identify these new communal groups.

While debates about online community authenticity are no longer the central issue in the CMC field, the issue of real versus the virtual in online community is still important to summarise for this project. The existence of online communities raises both unique and problematic concerns. While the debate is a non-issue for many in sociological and CMC research in the 21st century, the focus now being on how to react to these new manifestations of community, it is an area still being wrestled with in some theological and psychological circles. Investigating this debate demonstrates why the term “online community” is preferred over the label “virtual community” in this study.

The term “virtual” community carries with it the idea of a simulated community, based on a picture of something tangible, yet serving as a substitute for the real, a fact many critics spotlight as dangerous and a threat to real community. Critics typically highlight two problematic areas. First, virtual means an escape from reality, which seeks to provide a substitute for real world relationships. Secondly, they claim that for participants, the virtual community can become more real than the real world.

These claims are clearly voiced by Kimberly Young in her account of Internet addiction, *Caught in the Net*. Based on extensive survey research Young studies why and how obsessive Internet users begin engaging with the Internet. She argues that when they find it fills the need for relationships lacking in their lives, online interaction becomes a substitute. Soon Internet use becomes a complete escape from the real world. She claimed “Internet users become psychologically dependent on feelings and experiences they get while using

the machine and that's what makes it difficult to control or stop."²¹ Her major contention is that online relationships are illusionary, based on a created persona rather than a real person, and these are often deliberate mis-representations. She cites examples of "cyber widows" and "virtual adultery" where Internet addiction has led to the break up of marriages and families. She notes Turkle's work that also cautions about the substitutionary nature of online relationships; "computers offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship".²²

Young describes the Internet as "a living breathing electronic community" for obsessive Internet users, sometimes becoming a second home "which many would rather spend time in than their own physical home".²³ She claims this draw towards participation in the Internet community can be seen as "an antidote for our general cultural malaise". For many people faced with family and community break-up, "going online can connect us to a new family that at least appears to offer what real families can't".²⁴ Relationships online, she claims, fill this void, but due to environmental limitations they will lead to disappointment and confusion. The implication of this critical position is that real world relationships are preferred as always being good and positive.

Many critics claim what is virtual about online community are relationships themselves. They characterise the Internet as a de-personalising medium. Mark Slouka refers to the online community as the "digital hive", describing it as an anonymous mob guided by the invisible hand of the digerati, where the individual is lost in the collective identity of a "global superorganism".²⁵ Alluding to the Third Reich, he argues society is becoming "increasingly wired together economically and emotionally", causing it to be subsumed into a "global mind" controlled by the web of technology in which it is wrapped.²⁶

Advocates, however, emphasise it is not the relationships which are virtual, merely the methods and mode in which they are established and constructed. Online relationships and communication are "real" in the sense they do occur, although they are mediated. Rheingold, exploring this issue in an Internet document entitled, "Which part is Virtual? Which part is

²¹ Kimberly Young, *Caught in the Net. How to Recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction—and a Winning Strategy for Recovery* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1998), p. 9.

²² Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 30.

²³ Young, p. 20.

²⁴ Young, p. 29.

²⁵ Mark Slouka, *War of the Worlds-Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 96.

²⁶ Slouka, p. 104.

Real?” addresses claims of both advocates and critics.²⁷ For those who are sceptical of online relationship authenticity, he poses the question,

*Who made you the authority on what a life ought to be? ... Who are you to say that their electronic conversations and virtual friendships are less valuable than yours?*²⁸

Rheingold also urges online users to “get out from behind their screens” pointedly asking, “If you claim to be part of a virtual community, do you feel an obligation to make your ties with others more solid than data on a display screen?” It is obvious Rheingold’s ideas of community are rooted in human connection, whether physically situated or simply relationships which “change human hearts and minds”. He states it is the ability of the Internet to provide a bridge into real world relationships, which enables it to be a community. Recounting his own online experience he states, “The WELL felt like an authentic community to me from the start because it was grounded in my everyday physical world”.²⁹

Many critics, however, label Rheingold as a cyberutopian, often citing the following quote from *The Virtual Community* as proof he would encourage society to retreat into computer communities.

*We temporarily have access to a tool that could bring conviviality and understanding into our lives and might help revitalise the public sphere... This vision of a citizen-designed, citizen-controlled worldwide communications network is a version of technological utopianism that could be called the vision of 'the electronic agora'.*³⁰

Taken in isolation, this is misleading and does not offer the full picture of his vision and characterisation of the online community. The agora was the market place in ancient Athens where individuals met to talk. Rheingold contrasts it with the Panopticon, a prison where architecture and optics allow prisoners to feel they are under constant surveillance. He presents both as options of where the Internet could lead. Debate over the online community authenticity, he feels, centres on confusion between “task” and “tool”. Computer

²⁷ Howard Rheingold, ‘Which Part is Virtual? Which Part is Community?’ (1995) accessed 14 June 1998
<<http://www.well.com/user/hlr/tomorrow/vcreal.html>>

²⁸ Rheingold, ‘Which Part is Virtual? Which Part is Community?’,
<<http://www.well.com/user/hlr/tomorrow/vcreal.html>>

²⁹ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 2.

³⁰ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 14.

communication systems are tools, community is what one can do with those tools. As Rheingold states online,

If we want to dig deep into what they mean by 'virtual community,' the people who meet each other through computer conversation need to take those relationships into the physical world, where people visit each other, have fun together, help each other out, fall in love.³¹

Rheingold recognises new communication media produce new social phenomena, and so charges the public to get used to the idea that “the word ‘community’ is going to have to stretch to include groups of people who communicate socially and work together cooperatively and never meet in the real world”.³²

It cannot be overlooked that Rheingold’s work is heavily influenced by his experience in the 1960s Southern California hippie, communal culture. This is evident in his cautious approach to government control and use of technology. He stated, “before we argue the best way to build utopia, it might be time for citizens to unite against the encroachment of tyranny in the guise of technology”.³³ Though the first and most prominent, Rheingold is now one of numerous online communitarians who have come forward to address this issue.³⁴

For some, online communities are still seen as “pseudo-communities” in relation to a “reversal of centuries-old trend for organic community--based on interpersonal relationships--to impersonal association by mass means”.³⁵ In this sense they are non-traditional, involving mediated contact. They are selected and intentional, not free-forming. They can be deceptive, allowing individuals to hide true identity. They are often uncensored. They can breed shadow members, those who silently read and feel part of the conversation, but in actuality are unknown by the active community. Truly the online community has its problems, yet as can be seen throughout history, so do “real” communities.

³¹ Rheingold, ‘Which Part is Virtual? Which Part is Community?’
<<http://www.well.com/user/hlr/tomorrow/vcreal.html>>

³² Rheingold, ‘Which Part is Virtual? Which Part is Community?’
<<http://www.well.com/user/hlr/tomorrow/vcreal.html>>

³³ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 308.

³⁴ Other well-known spokespersons and researchers of the online community are Amy Bruckman, professor at Georgia Tech and Marc Smith, researcher at UCLA’s Center for the Study of the online Community. Consult: Scott Kirsner, ‘Virtual Communities: The Next Hot Major’, at *WIRED News* (7 Nov 1997) accessed 8 November 1997 <<http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,8363,00.html>>

³⁵ Margaret McLaughlin, Kerry Osborne and Christine Smith, ‘Standards of Conduct of Usenet,’ in *CyberSociety*, ed. by Steven Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 92.

Online communities can also be seen as an out-working of conditions created by the age of information. As people create and consume vast amounts of information, overload becomes commonplace. *Technopoly*, describes Postman, is “what happens to society when defences against information glut are broken down”.³⁶ Culture, “overcome by information generated through technology, tries to employ technology as a means of providing clear direction and humane purpose”.³⁷ This state of information overload creates an open door for the formation of online community, technology being used to cope with a condition created by technology. Individuals dependent on information exchange find CMC a fertile ground for building social relationships as well.

The online community can be understood as being virtual, but not in the sense of being “un-real”. The word “virtual”, as noted in chapter two, can be used to denote something, “whose existence is simulated with software rather than actually existing in hardware or some physical form”.³⁸ The word community, from chapter one’s discussion, is used to describe how individuals organise social relationships through creating social connections.

Combining these ideas, the term online community can be defined as a group of people linked together for social purpose whose relationships are mediated through Internet technology. The online community is, as Rheingold suggests, a “social aggregation”, guided by social commerce and relational content. The method for gathering people is new, but how and why communities are formed is not. The relationships are real, yet limited by the confines of the technology utilised.

This section has shown that while the online community has many forms, all types have a common purpose for existing, to connect individuals who then become part of what Rheingold calls a “living encyclopaedia”.³⁹ Members join online communities to have access to and build relationship with living resources. In this research study online Christian communities are the focus, investigating how people of faith build an online resource cooperative. In order to start this discussion the next section begins by introducing the area of cyber-spirituality, how religious and spiritual ideas are informing life online.

³⁶ Neil Postman, *Technopoly* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 41.

³⁷ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 72.

³⁸ Hiltz, p. 188.

³⁹ Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 57.

SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION ONLINE

“For many signing on to the Internet is a transformative act. In their eyes the web is more than just a global tapestry of personal computers. It is a vast cathedral of the mind, a place where ideas about God and religion can resonate, where faith can be shaped and defined by a collective spirit.”

-Joshua Chama⁴⁰

One of the underlying arguments of this thesis is that the Internet is increasingly conceived of as more than just an information space; it is seen as a space for spiritual exploration. For many, cyberspace is becoming a place of spiritual pilgrimage as people seek paths to ‘truth’. People are choosing to follow web links, browse BBSs and join with like minds in chat rooms and email lists in search of spiritual renewal. Other innovations, such as IRC prayer groups, enable individuals to simultaneously exchange prayers that are typed in and shared with people all over the world. These forums are often initiated at the grassroots level, by an individual rather than an organisation or institution. They can focus around such diverse topics as Christian women support groups and discussions on process theology. Listen closely in cyberspace and one may hear these new spiritual pilgrims singing, “Gimme that online religion”.⁴¹

While contemporary society often feels isolated and disconnected, people increasingly are choosing to log-on to the Internet to search for meaning, connection and spirituality. From its origins in science fiction literature “cyberspace” has possessed a mystical quality, a realm where the mind and spirit are given precedence over the body. The Internet has come to represent an other-worldly space allowing people to re-engage with issues of spirituality. Margaret Werheim, in *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, argues cyberspace allows people to once again express spiritual yearnings silenced in a world where science has received predominance over religion.

*The ‘spiritual’ appeal of cyberspace lies precisely in this paradox: It is a repackaging of the old idea of Heaven, but in a secular, technologically sanctioned format. The perfect realm awaits us, we are told, not behind the pearly gates but the electronic gateways labelled .com and .net. and .edu.*⁴²

⁴⁰ Joshua Cooper Chama, ‘Finding God on the Web’, in *TIME*, 16 Dec 1996, p. 57.

⁴¹ Consult: Brenda Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001)

⁴² Margaret Werheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* (London: Virago, 1999), p. 21.

Located in the seemingly timeless, boundless realm of computers, a new breed of spiritual pilgrims has emerged. Some choose to seek out traditional forms of religious expression from 20 million religious web sites said to exist online. On their own terms and in the privacy of their own homes they can visit cyber-cathedrals or temples. Others experiment with newer forms of religious expression: combinations of ancient beliefs altered and adapted for this technologically mediated environment.

In this section a brief overview of cyber-spirituality is given. How religion and spirituality are translated online is investigated through categories provided by Michael Bauwens describing how technology is conceived of in spiritual pursuits online. This leads into a discussion of Online Christianity, the focal religion of this study.

DESCRIBING CYBER-SPIRITUALITY

No unified spiritual vision or belief exists in cyberspace. Like the world beyond the screen, it exists as a marketplace of religions. Every major ideology and religious system existing in the real world is likely to be represented in cyberspace on some web site or in some discussion group. There are many different schools of spiritual thought in the digital world.

Spirituality can be defined as “the means through which mankind finds meaning in its relationship to the totality of the external world”.⁴³ Michael Bauwens says cyber-spirituality inspires different outlooks on technology, such as “Electric Gaia” and “The God Project”. Technology as an “Electric Gaia” characterises technology “as a necessary adjunct to make improvements in consciousness possible”.⁴⁴ Seeing technology as “The God Project” can be as crude and simple as a “crude substitute for spiritual powers”, or a search for a literal “Machine-God, Deus Ex Machina”.⁴⁵ He also identified a third characterisation, “Sacramental Cyberspace”, where the Internet becomes a place to further the aims of various religious expressions or even to serve as a tool for “transmission of spiritual energy”.⁴⁶ These three characterisations are used here to briefly explore spiritual beliefs and practices online.

⁴³ Michael Bauwens, ‘Spirituality and Technology: Exploring the Relationship’, at *First Monday*, (4 November 1996) accessed 6 September 1998 <<http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue5/bauwens/index.html>>

⁴⁴ Bauwens, ‘Spirituality and Technology: Exploring the Relationship’, <<http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue5/bauwens/index.html>>

⁴⁵ Bauwens, ‘Spirituality and Technology: Exploring the Relationship’, <<http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue5/bauwens/index.html>>

⁴⁶ Bauwens, ‘Spirituality and Technology: Exploring the Relationship’, <<http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue5/bauwens/index.html>>

The idea of technology as Electric Gaia is illustrated by the adoption of the philosophy of Jesuit theologian and anthropologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He is often referred to as the patron saint of cyberspace. His theological writings envisioned an evolutionary space called the “noosphere”, a term loosely defined as the sphere of the mind in contrast to the term biosphere, the sphere of life.⁴⁷ Teilhard saw the noosphere emerging as a web of global consciousness allowing an individual to expand and find freedom from the illusion of personal isolation. This he predicted would lead to worldwide love and harmony. As Teilhard wrote,

*No one can deny that a Network (a world Network) of economic and psychic affiliations is being woven at ever increasing speed which envelops and constantly penetrates more deeply within each of us. With every day that passes it becomes a little more impossible for us to act or think otherwise than collectively.*⁴⁸

Many say the web is the prophetic reality of what Teilhard’s theology sought to describe. His ideas have been re-packaged by many into a philosophy and way to describe Internet technology and the network of relationships emerging. Jennifer Cobb, in *Cybergrace, The Search for God in a Digital World*, uses Teilhard’s noosphere idea in her attempt to create a “theology of cyberspace”. She also highlights his idea of the Omega point “where all layers of the universe are centred” and “the concentration of pure consciousness and absolute unity”.⁴⁹ For Teilhard the Omega point is God or “pure spirit”, and the process of evolution moves closer to this point of unity. Cobb claims these ideas enable exploration of the Internet as a spiritual network and cyberspace can aid humanity’s spiritual progression, describing it as an “important way station” on humanity’s journey towards a greater spiritual evolution.⁵⁰

Not surprisingly, Teilhard has a following on the web. Hundreds of web sites associated the idea of the noosphere with a new model for what many describe as the ideal community. The Internet is thought of as drawing humans together, producing a unified community. John Perry Barlow, co-founder of the Electronic Frontiers Foundation and lyricist for the Grateful Dead, also considers Teilhard a model for the web, referring to it as the “hardwiring of the noosphere” and a place with the potential to create a united consciousness. “I think that the

⁴⁷ Julian Huxley, ‘Introduction’, in *The Phenomenon of Man* (London: Harper TorchBooks, 1959), p. 13

⁴⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Formation of the Noosphere*, 1947, 7 May 1997 <<http://www.sun-angel.com/noosphere/noosphere.html>> (no longer available online) For similar sources consult Noosphere, The Expanding Web of Consciousness. 5 June 2001 <<http://www.technoetic.com/noosphere/index.html>>

⁴⁹ Jennifer Cobb, *Cybergrace. The Search for God in the Digital World* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998), p. 89.

⁵⁰ Cobb, p. 97.

Internet is about us wiring together precisely what Teilhard was talking about, the collective organisation of the mind".⁵¹ The Teilhardian interpretation of the Internet illustrates how individuals are seeking out not just new technological realities, such as VR, but spiritual realities as well.

Technology as the God Project is seen through the applications of paganism, known as technopaganism, within online environment as individuals adapt and re-invent religious practices. Technopaganism seeks to consciously ritualise cyberspace. It is an umbrella term covering a variety of beliefs and practices from pantheistic goddess worshippers to those who dabble in witchcraft. A technopagan has been defined as "a participant in a small but vital subculture of digital savants who keep one foot in the emerging technosphere and one foot in the wild and woolly world of Paganism".⁵² VRML co-creator and frequently cited technopagan, Mark Pesce, says the purpose of technopaganism is to bring the magical space and cyberspace together. "Without the sacred there is no differentiation in space. If we are to enter Cyberspace, the first thing we have to do is plant the divine in it".⁵³

Technopaganism allows individuals to practice ancient pagan rituals online. Postings such as the Technopagan Blessing⁵⁴ and rituals such as "Cyber Samhain" (a digitally enhanced version of the ancient Celtic celebration of the dead, also known as Halloween) allow pagans to combine myth and fantasy with technology. The technopagan movement embraces techno-witches (like Pesce), techno-druids, techno-shamans and ravers. It should be noted, not all pagans are technopagans. Yet, as Erik Davis in *Technognosis* says, computers become for many pagans the holding grounds for myths of the "ancient ways", and "spiritual powers" can be sought out online. Whether it is used as a space for connection or as a "ritual technology", the Internet becomes magical as it acts "as portals into another world".⁵⁵ Technopaganism illustrates how individuals can use technology not just as a tool or space for worship, but to adapt beliefs so that engaging with the technology becomes an act of worship.

⁵¹ 'Communing with John Perry Barrow', at *Educa Review*, 32 (Sept/October 1997) accessed 6 December 1998 <<http://www.ebscohost.com/cgi-bin/ep...recs=10/recount=41/startrec=1/ft=1>> no longer available online

⁵² For a more thorough explanation of Technopaganism consult: Erik Davis, 'Technopagan', at *WIRED*, (June 1997) accessed 14 June 1998 <<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/3.07/technopagans.html>>

⁵³ Davis, <<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/3.07/technopagans.html>>

⁵⁴ *Technopagan Prayer*, 10 April 1998 <<http://www-nmr.baffcentre.ab.ca/Artists/scaredsacred/TECHNOPAGANPRAYER.html>> no longer available online

⁵⁵ Erik Davis, *Technognosis* (New York: Random House, 1998), p. 189.

Utilising technology to create Sacramental Cyberspace is illustrated in the way some traditional religious groups utilise the Internet as a tool for spiritual connection. One example is *Virtual Jerusalem*,⁵⁶ designed to bring Israel and Jewish Culture to English-speaking Jews worldwide. Avi Moskowitz created the web site with the intent to, “try and recreate what was offline, I wanted to be the Jewish world online, mirroring the physical community or improving on it”.⁵⁷ His intention was to enable Jews to re-engage with their faith and culture by exploring relevant information housed in a central location. The site includes special features such as “Send a Prayer” allowing registered users to follow the age old custom of placing notes in a crack in the western Wailing Wall by emailing a prayer to Jerusalem. Individuals can also access live coverage the Wailing Wall 24-hours a day thanks to a web cam.⁵⁸ William Hisle said he found the web site by entering the words ‘Wailing Wall’ in an online search engine. Since then he has visited the site frequently and sent two prayer requests to the Wall. This, he feels, connects him “not so much to Judaism as it links...to God”.⁵⁹

In viewing the Internet as sacred space some religious groups have gone so far as to consecrate cyberspace. Tibetan monks at the Namgyal Institute in Ithaca, New York (personal monastery of the Dalai Lama) on 8 February 1996 pronounced a blessing over cyberspace using a tantric ritual. According to a summary of the blessing found online it was felt,

*In using the Internet we noticed the Net breeds both positive and negative behaviours, reflecting the very human nature of we who use it. In this sense it became apparent that the space known as cyberspace was very appropriate for a tantric spiritual blessing—to help purify how it is used and the ‘results’ it yields.*⁶⁰

During the thirty-minute ceremony Monks chanted while “envisioning space as cyberspace, the networked realms of computers”. Buddhists, according to Jeff Zaleski in *The Soul of Cyberspace*, were also the first major world religion to duplicate online and in full a traditional form of religious practice. Dharma Combat, a form of unrehearsed dialogue which tests Zen practitioners in their understanding of Zen truth, has taken place online since

⁵⁶ *Virtual Jerusalem.com*. 5 June 2001 <<http://www.virtualjerusalem.com/>>

⁵⁷ Bonnie Rothman Morris, “Surfing Their Way to the Holy Land,” *The New York Times on the Web*, 28 January 1999. 28 January 1999 <<http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/99/01/circuits/articles/28jeru.html>>

⁵⁸ Aish Ha Torah’s Window on the Wall. 5 June 2001 <<http://aish.com/wallcam/>>

⁵⁹ Bonnie Rothman Morris, ‘Surfing Their Way to the Holy Land’, at *The New York Times on the Web* (28 January 1999) accessed 28 January 1999

<<http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/99/01/circuits/articles/28jeru.html>>

⁶⁰ As noted in: Cobb, p. 234. Blessing found at: *The Blessings of Cyberspace*, 10 April 1998 <<http://www.namgyal.org/blessing.html>>

1996 hosted by Zen Mountain monastery in New York. They “have embraced the digital duality of 1 and 0 as skilful means for communicating the Dharma” as the Internet facilitates this ritual practice and dialogue between spiritual teachers and students.⁶¹ Both examples illustrate that cyberspace is being utilised in sacramental ways as many religions actively seek out the spiritual components of cyber-culture.

While a more extensive survey of religion and spirituality on the Internet might prove insightful, it is beyond the scope of this research project.⁶² The intention here is to provide a brief overview of cyber-spirituality in preparation for discussing the primary religion under investigation in this study, Christianity. The next section explores how and why Christianity uses the Internet as a sacred space.

ONLINE CHRISTIANITY

Christian groups have readily appropriated Internet technology into their ministries and outreach with impressive results. This can be observed from the highly popular Vatican homepage, which became inundated with messages through the “e-mail the pope” link within hours of being put online. Incorporating this technology is seen by many as essential for the church to stay in touch with modern society. “We live in a high tech time,” commented Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, head of the Roman Catholic Diocese in Denver (USA). “For us to miss the opportunity new technologies give us to preach and educate and inform would be harmful to the mission of the church.”⁶³

David Lochhead in *Shifting Realities: Information Technology and the Church*, says computer enthusiasts in the Church began in the 1980s to explore using computers as tools for ministry and “ways to use this new means of communication to express their religious interests”.⁶⁴ He offers examples of several BBSs and Compuserve discussion groups started by various theologians and priests to discuss religious topics in an online forum. The Church Computer Users Network (CCUN), an ecumenical and national organisation started in the USA by the United Methodist Church, is cited as one of the early examples of computer networking for religious purposes which has facilitated many BBS discussion groups. By the

⁶¹ Jeff Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace* (San Francisco: HarperEdge, 1997), p. 164.

⁶² For a thorough survey of this topic see: Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace* (San Francisco: HarperEdge, 1997)

⁶³ Leslie Miller, ‘Religious groups find revival on the Web’, at *USA Today Tech Report* (30 March 1998) accessed 30 March 1998 <<http://www.usatoday.com/life/dcovwed.htm>> no longer available online

⁶⁴ David Lochhead, *Shifting Realities: Information Technology and the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), p. 46.

mid-1980s several Christian online computer networking groups were functioning online, such as the Computer Applications for Ministry Network (CAMNET), Religious Associates-an electronic discussion group on software for religious groups, and PresbyNETI-a computer conferencing system offering theological and technical assistance.

A landmark event for religious use of the Internet, according to Lochhead, occurred in January 1986 when an online memorial liturgy was conducted in remembrance of the US space shuttle *Challenger* that exploded soon after takeoff. Organised on a network discussion board called Unison it involved a liturgy, prayers, scripture and meditation followed by a “coffee hour” designed as general discussion for individuals to post reactions to the tragedy. This online service “demonstrated the power of the computer medium to unite a community in a time of crisis beyond the limits of geography or denomination”.⁶⁵ Lochhead describes other developments in various Christian computer networks, stressing the fact that these groups began to form “a sense of identity as a community that existed independently of whatever service they chose for their electronic communication”.⁶⁶ He notes the Church has always been about communication, yet the online church offers a unique and vibrant innovation to traditional ways of being.⁶⁷

While online spiritual exploration seems to be increasing, it is important to note Church attendance within many mainline churches continues to decrease rapidly. This phenomenon has caused many in the religious community to call for more active participation in the online setting. Anthropologist and journalist from the Religious Studies Institute of Rio de Janeiro, Andre Mello claims,

*Religious groups that remain outside [the Internet communication revolution] will become ghettos, like some Puritan communities in the 18th and 19th centuries, who tried to halt the passage of time to preserve tradition...Changes arising from computer technology are irreversible.*⁶⁸

Movement towards online religion and expressions of Church are seen as given. A 1998 Barna Research Group (USA) report proclaimed “The Cyberchurch is coming” as a “when” rather than an “if” statement. This judgement, based on a national survey targeting

⁶⁵ Lochhead, p. 52.

⁶⁶ Lochhead, p. 53.

⁶⁷ A detailed account of these developments can be found: Lochhead, pp. 42-54.

⁶⁸ ‘Join the Internet or become a ghetto, pastor tells Christians’, at *Ecumenical News International* (26 May 1998) accessed 26 May 1998
<<http://search.atomz.com/search/?spq=Join+the+Internet+or+become+a+ghetto&sp-x=desc&sp-a=000504bf-sp00000003>>

teenagers, found one out of six teens said they expected to use the Internet as a substitute for current church-based religious experience within the next five years. Common uses included interactions with others in chat rooms or email exchanges about religious beliefs. Group President, George Barna stated, "If you add up the proportion of people who will call the Cyberchurch their 'church home', those who will align with an independent house church and those who will be steadfastly unchurched... a majority of Americans will be completely isolated from the traditional church format".⁶⁹ The challenge, he claims, facing Christian leaders is not how to stop new forms of church, but how to meet the challenge of ensuring "those forms are tied in to the foundational theology and principles that reflect the basis of the existing church".⁷⁰ These findings were verified by 2001 Barna survey on net-based faith experiences, which found 8% of the surveyed adult population and 12% of teens now use the Internet for religious purposes. Barna predicts the American church will drastically change in the next decade as their research found "Christian Internet users already spend more time surfing the Net than they do communicating with God through prayer".⁷¹

In line with this trend, Cobb in *Cybergrace* encourages people to find ways to bring computers into their "sacred lives". Promoting a "theology of cyberspace" she states,

*The divine expresses itself in the digital terrain through the vast global computer networks that are now beginning to display rudimentary self organising properties...if we can allow ourselves to understand the deeper, sacred mechanisms of cyberspace we can begin to experience it as a medium for grace.*⁷²

By pointing out "the sacred is present in computers", Cobb sees cyberspace as a place for society to find healing and for helping us reconnect the spheres of science and religion. Defining cyberspace as sacred space enables individuals to consider how the Internet influences humanity on a multi-dimensional level. She also rejects the dualism between mind and body that underlies much of western thought, philosophy, and theology. Cobb believes cyberspace has "intrinsic value, that ties it irretrievably to the larger sacred fabric of the universe forms an important starting point".⁷³

⁶⁹ Barna Research Group, 'The Cyberchurch is Coming. National Survey of Teenagers shows Expectation of Substituting Internet for Corner Church', at *Barna Research Online Home Page* (5 May 1998) accessed 12 May 1998 <<http://www.barna.org/cgibin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=9&Reference=C>>

⁷⁰ Barna Research Group, 'The Cyberchurch is Coming', <<http://www.barna.org/cgibin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=9&Reference=C>>

⁷¹ Barna Research Group, 'More American Are Seeking Net-Based Faith Experiences', at *Barna Research Online Home Page* (21 May 2001) 23 May 2001

<<http://www.barna.org/cgibin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=90&Reference=D>>

⁷² Cobb, pp. 43-44.

⁷³ Cobb, p. 233.

Margaret Werheim makes a similar argument that the Internet is providing a bridge re-linking the worlds of science and religion. As a science historian she argues cyberspace contains a conception of space “outside the physical space that science has articulated”.⁷⁴ In *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* she points out that for the past 3,000 years there has been a link in western thought “between what is immaterial, non-physical and the spiritual”. From her perspective cyberspace provides a viable way to reintroduce the spiritual world into the post-modern context. She traces the roots of virtual reality and conceptions of spiritual space back to the medieval world of gothic cathedrals and the artwork of Giotto where virtual and physical spaces were united. Cyberspace brings us back to a powerful understanding of “Christian soul space” and the immaterial world lost in modern science. Cyberspace takes on a religious feel; it alters ideas of space, and visions of reality are likely also to alter. Werheim, however, cautions people not to see cyberspace as the saviour of the soul. Before reading spiritual desires onto digitised space it is important to recognise cyberspace as a communally produced world tied to historical and evolving roots.

In many respects the Internet “has come to resemble a high-speed spiritual bazaar”.⁷⁵ Rather than presenting a unified front, the diversity of Christian groups on the Internet is seen by some as a new sort of ghettoising of religion. Joe Chidley writes,

*In the 1990s, Christianity has found a new platform to spread the word. But the Internet being what it is—the ultimate venue for freedom of expression—that word has a host of manifestations, amounting to a digital Tower of Babel.*⁷⁶

As the amount of individuals who log on to the Internet increases daily, so do the number finding their way on to various religious online groups. Claims are being made that these online communities are contributing to the building of the greater Christian community. As Jason Baker, author of the *Christian Cyberspace Companion* wrote, “Cyberspace has enabled believers to cross social, geographical and denomination boundaries and has done a great deal to bring together the body of Christ”.⁷⁷ However, no substantive proof exists at this point to suggest these “new communities of spiritual consensus” are having a beneficial or numerically significant impact.

⁷⁴ Jim McClellan, ‘Log on, all ye faithful’, at *The Guardian Online* (9 December 1998) accessed 9 December 1998 <<http://online.guardian.co.uk/theweb/913212249-spirit.html>> no longer available online

⁷⁵ Chama, p. 53.

⁷⁶ Joe Chidley, ‘Jesus on the Net. A new platform for believers and heretics alike’, in *Macleans* (15 Dec 1997), p. 46.

⁷⁷ Jason Baker, *Christian Cyberspace Companion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), p. 163.

As Christianity has gone online it has had to alter or adapt its methods of worship and represent various theological ideas. This survey of how the Internet is being utilised for religious purposes has provided a glimpse at how the technology is shaping beliefs as well as practices of the faithful online. The next section offers a more focused look at how Christianity is manifest on the Internet and lays ground work for the research questions concerning online Christian community to be presented in chapter four.

MANIFESTATIONS OF ONLINE CHRISTIANITY

“The boundary crossing, barrier breaking capacities that are intrinsic to both hypertext and computer networks are perfect illustrations of the happy conjunction of technology and theology. And there is every reason to believe that world shaking forces of similar proportion and power to those unleashed at the time of the Protestant Reformation are being set loose once again and shall have equally profound effects upon the way in which people practice faith as well as communicate with each other and with God.”

-Charles Henderson⁷⁸

The Internet is being proclaimed by some as the second “electronic” Reformation, as is stressed in this introductory quote. Like the printing press, the Internet is seen as a revolutionary tool for spreading the message of Christianity. Yet, online Christianity is about more than simply utilising a new medium for proclamation. The Internet is also re-shaping ideas of faith and facilitating new ways of gathering as the “Body of Christ”. The focus of this section is to present a brief overview of three manifestations of Christianity in the online setting: cyberchurches, e-vangelism and Christian online communities.

These three trends are relatively new, yet growing developments. To some, talk of a “cyberchurch” sounds like misguided science fiction; yet in one form or another it already exists. Many web sites have been designed with icons and metaphoric devices to resemble a sanctuary, calling themselves cyberchurches. Some of these entities exist and function as church structures, using technology such as RealAudio/Video to allow individuals to listen to sermons and join in online congregational services. Seeing the Internet as space for church planting is linked to the desire to use the “gospel to penetrate cyberspace”. This has given rise to a movement of cyber-evangelists. Often referred to as “e-vangelism”, this form of online witnessing takes place through web sites and in chat rooms, with various books and online resources providing guidance. Also, many people are logging on to the Internet daily and finding their way to various Christian online communities formed through email, chat

⁷⁸ Charles Henderson, ‘The Emerging Faith Communities of Cyberspace’, at *CMC Magazine* (March 1997) accessed 14 April 1997 <<http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1997/mar/hend.html>>

rooms and IRC links. These online communities are claimed to contribute to the building of the greater Christian community. Often not formed around a specific “real world” Christian church or organisation. These “new communities of spiritual consensus” represent grassroots efforts of individuals searching for like-minded believers with whom to communicate.

However questionable talk of online Christianity may seem, the fact remains cyberchurches, web-based e-vangelism and online Christian communities continue to emerge and grow on the Internet. These manifestations create new options for people of faith and have potential to change the ways the Church communicates, how others see Christianity and expectations of how the religious community should be.

CYBERCHURCHES

The 1996 *TIME* magazines’ article ‘Finding God on the Web’ proclaimed,

*Just as urbanisation brought people together for worship in the cities...so the electronic gathering of millions of faithful could someday lead to online entities that might be thought of as cyberchurches.*⁷⁹

Today numerous web sites exist claiming to be these cyberchurches in a variety of forms. In *Cyberchurch*, Patrick Dixon describes the Internet as the “greatest new market to emerge in the history of humankind and will cause a revolution” birthing innovations such as the “cyberchurch”. He defines cyberchurch in two ways: 1) “As the body of all Christians who interact using global computer networks and 2) as an electronically linked group of believers, aiming to reproduce in cyberspace aspects of conventional church life”.⁸⁰ In this study, the term cyberchurch refers to church-like entities existing solely on the Internet and having no real world equivalent structure. These are to be distinguished from the thousands of “real world” churches represented online through web pages. Cyberchurches have been referred to as “churches without walls, that literally ‘gather together’ via the Internet”.⁸¹

One of the most cited examples is *The First Church of Cyberspace*.⁸² Founded by Rev. Charles Henderson of the Presbyterian Church in New Jersey-USA, it is described as a consortium of ecumenical churches and individuals who meet online every Sunday evening

⁷⁹ Chama, pp. 54-55.

⁸⁰ Patrick Dixon, *Cyberchurch, Christianity and the Internet* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1997), p. 17.

⁸¹ Steven Hewitt, ‘Can there be a REAL Internet Church?’ at *Christian Computing Magazine*. 10 (September 1998) accessed 21 September 1998 <<http://www.gospel.com.net/ccmag/articles/cov0998.shtml>> no longer available online

⁸² *The First Church of Cyberspace*. 21 June 1999 <<http://www.godweb.org/>>

at 9 p.m. (EST) for conversations using IRC. Henderson claims Presbyterians, who through the technology of the printing press became the “people of the book,” were also the “first denomination of cyberspace”. Beginning in 1985 with Presbynet, a BBS system for Presbyterians, they formed *The First Church of Cyberspace* in the 1990s. The Internet, he argues, possesses the power of the Protestant Reformation to unleash new ways “in which people practice faith, as well as communicate with each other and God”.⁸³ Besides the weekly gathering on Sunday it offers other interactive elements such as recorded sermons and songs, exchanges in its chat room and a message board service where individuals can leave messages on “any topic of interest to Christians or pertaining to Christianity”. According to their web page their online presence seeks to drop “clues that point to the presence of the Creator within the creative chaos of the Internet” and facilitate formation of new faith communities online.

The success of *The First Church of Cyberspace* has made Henderson a major advocate of forming faith and community in and through the Internet. He notes that traditional Protestant denominations are “declining and have an ageing population. To grow, we’re going to have to communicate on the Internet”.⁸⁴ This is more than simply utilising a new medium; it is learning a new way to communicate faith and the Bible. As Barth challenged his students to grasp the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, Henderson would encourage the church to do likewise with a computer keyboard.

Many other cyberchurches have also emerged, such as the *Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua*⁸⁵ and *WebChurch*⁸⁶, which allow individuals to interact with hypertext, images and sound, but lack the ability to interact with other online attendees. These online creations have no real world equivalent, which the faithful can visit beyond the computer screen. The *Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua* gets its name from a “little old dog with cataracts, who barked sideways at strangers, because he couldn’t see where they were”. The site claims “we humans relate to God in the same way, making noise in God’s general direction, and expecting a reward for doing so”.⁸⁷ It seeks to provide a “Christian presence on the Internet” and has given its separate page links names referring to parts of a traditional cathedral. In the “nave” one can select various links to traditional and original resources for daily offices and meditations. The “scriptorium” provides link to a “unique collection of

⁸³ Henderson, <<http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1997/mar/hend.html>>

⁸⁴ Miller, <<http://www.usatoday.com/life/dcovwed.htm>> no longer available online

⁸⁵ *The Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua*. 21 June 1999 <<http://www.dogchurch.org/>>

⁸⁶ *The WebChurch - The WorldWide Virtual Church from Scotland*. 21 June 1999 <<http://www.webchurch.org>>

⁸⁷ *The Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua* <<http://www.dogchurch.org/>>

illuminated (and benighted) manuscripts”. The site is characterised by a satirical element offering more light-hearted interaction than space for religious devotion.

WebChurch calls itself the first online church outside the USA and the first cyberchurch in Scotland. It exists to “help people connect with God”. As its web site states, “Like the church Jesus founded the *WebChurch* has no buildings, no fabric fund, no coffee mornings and no committees. The *WebChurch* is people: people who visit this site and people who pray for the visitors to this site”.⁸⁸ Based out of Newport-on-Tay, Scotland, one of its main focuses is offering prayer support for those who visit the site. Individuals can read through various prayers on the site and are encouraged to send email prayer requests. According to an article in the *Internet for Christians* email newsletter, “Christians from eight village churches pray daily for each request” with most being housebound volunteers who devote their time to this ministry.⁸⁹ Seeking to be a spiritual home on the Internet for netizens, *WebChurch* provides information, material and prayer support for its visitors.

Cyberchurches have become a sacred space to which devotees travel to interact alone or together with others. Dozens exist online in various forms, yet most remain as broadcast rather than interactive forums. While some still find the idea of a cyberchurch with no real world counterpart worrying, the fact remains online religious-based entities and groups are continuing to emerge online.

E-VANGELISM

Besides challenging ideas of what it means to gather as a church, the Internet is changing the ways people communicate ideas of faith. A movement in witnessing online has emerged, often referred to as “e-vangelism”. Quentin Schultze, professor of communications at Calvin College (USA) and author of the book *Internet for Christians* said,

*A lot of religious groups are finding that if you're really serious about evangelising and preaching the gospel and bringing the word of God to people, then you probably have to have a presence on the Internet.*⁹⁰

⁸⁸ *The WebChurch* <<http://www.webchurch.org>>

⁸⁹ Email from Online Newsletter *Internet for Christians*, ‘SCOTTISH VILLAGERS PRAY FOR THE WORLD’, Date sent: Tue, 25 May 1999 23:01:18 -0400 (EDT), To: ifc@gospelcom.net, Subject: INTERNET FOR CHRISTIANS, May 24, 1999 / Issue 84

⁹⁰ Diego Ribadeneira, ‘Clergy click with cyberworshippers’, in *Boston Globe*, 26 August 1998, p. A01.

In e-vangelism focus is put on presenting a purposeful Christian presence in cyberspace through a variety of means, taking place through web sites, in chat rooms and on e-mail lists.

One of the first organisations to see the Internet as a potential “mission field” was Gospel Communication Network (GCN).⁹¹ It was launched in April 1995 with the goal to “provoke people to think deeply about the nature of God” by “saturating Cyberspace with the greatest news of all”. Under the umbrella of Gospel Films Inc., GCN provides WebPages space, set-up services and technological support for Christian ministries such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, International Bible Society and the Luis Palau Evangelistic Association. GCN’s homepage also serves as a clearinghouse for Christian ministries and resources, receiving over one million hits a day and is ranked by Media Matrix within the top 500 web sties world wide. Quentin Schultze, GCN’s Director of New Technologies, calls the growth of GCN a “technological unfolding of God’s creation”, enabling the church to reach out to people who would never enter a church. This desire to see the “gospel penetrate cyberspace” has also given rise to a movement of cyber-evangelists who want to see this new technology used “for the glory of God”.

One of the most common methods of e-vangelism is through web sites. Some sites are designed with a deliberate, up-front presentation of the gospel or “plan of salvation”. Such is the case with the site *Who is Jesus?*,⁹² which displays a theological apologetics argument on the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Linked to the online text version of a traditional evangelistic tract called “The Four Spiritual Laws”, it provides a response form for individuals to gain information about the Jesus film or request information about Christianity. This page is linked to the Campus Crusade for Christ International home page, an evangelistic student organisation.

Many resource pages have surfaced providing instructions and training for those looking for strategies for online e-vangelism. *Web Evangelism: Exciting New Tool for the New Millennium* offers ideas on creating web environments to “draw in non-believers and introduce them to Christ”. It provides practical advice on setting up web sites and how to witness in a chat room. Other resource pages, such as *E-vangelism.com*,⁹³ provide site links for “electronic evangelists” and those involved in “virtual ministries”. This site, focused around Andrew Carega’s book *E-vangelism: Sharing the Gospel in Cyberspace*, addresses

⁹¹ *Gospel Communications Network*. 18 July 1998 <<http://www.gospelcom.net>>

⁹² *Who is Jesus?* 21 June 1999 <<http://www.ccci.org/whoisjesus/>>

⁹³ *E-vangelism.com*. 21 June 1999 <<http://e-vangelism.com/>>

issues raised by doing “friendship evangelism” through building relationships in online conferences or “surf evangelism” through visiting web sites. Carega advocates online missionaries be fluent in the language of technology as well as being aware and sensitive to this new culture of the Internet before venturing into cyberspace. He uses talk of empowerment to rally support of the masses for involvement in the information revolution. “It’s up to us the ‘peasants’ of the revolution to take the Internet for Christ. It is up to those of us who will devote themselves to the task, who will take the time to build relationships with seeker online and commit themselves to nurturing those relationships”.⁹⁴

E-vangelism presents the Internet as the new mission field of the 21st century. Walter Wilson in *The Internet Church*, envisions through the Internet “we have the opportunity to reach every man, woman and child on the face of the earth in the next decade,” a phrase used three times in his book.⁹⁵ Wilson stresses the Internet’s pervasive nature, ability to cross social and cultural borders and non-threatening environment make it an ideal medium for individuals to engage in spiritual searching. “It provides a seeker with the ability to navigate his or her way to the foot of Calvary’s cross,” he claims.⁹⁶ E-vangelism focuses on utilising the Internet as a tool for conversion and e-evangelists call for Christians to pick up this tool as part of the divine mandate to “Go into all the world”.⁹⁷ Yet research on the electronic television church has shown, that just because one can utilise a new technology for evangelism it does not mean the medium will be effective or lead to intended results.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, while claims about complete penetration of the gospel may be hard to substantiate, e-vangelism activities seem likely to increase over the next decade.

ONLINE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Another trend in online Christianity is the formation of Christian communities through the Internet, the digital “body of Christ”. Online Christian communities facilitate interactions with the geographically inaccessible. They provide online meeting spaces for Christians to share their spiritual experiences. Some online Christian communities are the intentional creation of various Church groups or denominations, utilising web sites and RealAudio/Video technologies. One example of this is the Toronto Airport Christian

⁹⁴ Andrew Carega. *E-vangelism: Sharing the Gospel in Cyberspace*, (Lafayette, LA: Vital Issues Press, 1999), p. 24.

⁹⁵ Walter Wilson, *The Internet Church* (Nashville: Word Publishing., 2000), p. 2, 120 and 154.

⁹⁶ Wilson, p. 25.

⁹⁷ The Great Commission, Matthew 28. 18-20

⁹⁸ For findings on the effects of TV evangelism consult: ‘Ten Myths About Religious Broadcasting’, in *Religious Television. Controversies and Conclusions*, ed. by Robert Ableman and Stewart Hoover (New Jersey: Albex Publish House, 1990)

Fellowship (TACF), the church made famous through the "Toronto Blessing". In January 1998 they launched Revival Live Network to broadcast services daily on the web live. Digital cameras allow online users to "come on line with your computer and have a front row seat, hear and see what the Spirit is doing in Toronto and never leave the comfort of your own home or office". Sources at the church estimate somewhere between 1,500 to 4,000 people access the TACF web site each day.⁹⁹ In a March 1998 letter sent out by the church numerous individuals shared testimonies of how access affected their spiritual lives, many commenting that the broadcasts enabled them to engage with God. As one couple from Israel were quoted saying, "Just wanted you to know that we are now with you everyday live on the Internet and that God is ministering to us in Power. More Lord!"¹⁰⁰

Yet in this study the focus is on online Christian communities formed at a grassroots level, emerging as people find others online while searching to become part of a group conversation on a specified topic. Online Christian communities congregate around an issue of faith, from a general topic of spirituality or mysticism to a specific focus on doctrinal beliefs or denominational emphasis (Episcopal, Baptist, etc.). While many web sites refer to themselves as online communities, most provide interaction with hypertext and images only. Online Christian communities are interactive groups, facilitating two-way interaction through various computer technologies.

Some groups utilise Internet Relay Chat (IRC) as a forum to congregate. By downloading IRC Software, such as mIRC, individuals are able to join various channels designated as Christian meeting places and hold "typed" conversations with others. IRC communities often encompass specific groups of people who have met through another media, such as an email list, and have a designated a channel and a specific time to meet. Another way IRC is used is for online prayer meetings, members gathering at a specific time each week for moderated prayers and times of encouragement.

Similar to IRC are web site-based chat rooms. These help create interest and keep a steady flow of traffic visiting a web site. An example of a Christian chat room is *ReaperNET*¹⁰¹, a web site created by individuals influenced by the Pensacola/Brownsville Revival (Florida,

⁹⁹ *Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship*. 21 June 1999 <<http://www.tacf.org/>>

¹⁰⁰ Taken from a Marketing Letter sent out 9 March 1998 from the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship in Toronto, Canada.

¹⁰¹ *Reapernet, Christianity with a Passion*. 21 June 1999 <<http://www.Reapernet.com/>>

USA). One of its main features is ReaperNET Chat¹⁰² described as an “international revival community for Christians”. Though open to all faiths and backgrounds it seems mainly to draw charismatic, Pentecostal Christians. On visiting one may observe conversations focusing around Christian holidays (Easter and Christmas), discussion of revival sermons or prayer request exchanges. ReaperNET Chat provides an example of how the web can provide a meeting point for individuals of similar interests and convictions to connect with one another.

Another form of online Christian community is an email list. They are gathered around a common theme and are typically managed by a central computer database; individuals receive general postings or receive mail from members of the community. To truly be a community, members must not only be able to read, but also exchange messages with the entire group. This type of online community is the focus of this study and will be expanded upon in later chapters.

All of these forms of Christian online communities revolve around common themes: experience, interaction and connection. Members select the type and topic of community they join based on the type of experience they are looking for. Interaction is based on what they are able to receive and give to the group. The strength of the connection is based on the affinity individuals feel for the group or topic. In each case the Internet enables individuals to engage with people in ways they would normally be unable to experience. For some their online Christian community is more vibrant than their real world church community. This is an area to be explored more in-depth in the following chapters.

This survey of online Christianity sparks off many questions. Can the cyberchurch really be ‘The Church’? How will e-vangelism affect individuals’ conceptions of the Church and Christian community? While many issues could be explored, this study maintains its focus on examination of Christian online communities, exploring the specific influence they might have on the Church.

¹⁰² *Reapernet Chat, International Revival Café Chat*. 21 June 1999 <<http://chat.reapernet.com/>>

SUMMARY: APPROACHING ONLINE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The aim of this chapter has been to define and describe the online community and to investigate what Rheingold referred to as “emotional attachment to an apparently bloodless technological ritual” of online users.¹⁰³ The online community combines traditional traits of community, people with similar traits gathering together, with a new “online” setting. It has shown the online community is more than people utilising technology in a new way to connect with each other; it involves new ways of conceiving of what it means to be in a communal relationship with others. Offering new ways of gathering, the online community introduces new types of behaviour and group relations. Considering what is traditional or “real”, compared to what is new and “virtual”, is central to the task of trying to identify in what ways the online community is a mirror of the real world and in what ways it alters or re-presents community in the 21st century. An online community is defined as individuals who assemble through Internet technology and form a network of interdependent relationships based on a common vision, care and communication.

This chapter has also shown how various forms of religion have approached and utilised the Internet. The general overview of cyber-religion showed how certain religious groups practise their beliefs online. Some of these spiritual ideas support the metaphoric images introduced in chapter two, such as Teilhard’s noosphere promoting the idea that the Internet is a social, spiritual network with potential to bring humanity to a new level of consciousness. The overview of online Christianity demonstrates how the Christian community has transported and adapted various religious practices into the online environment. Rather than shy away from the Internet, many Christian groups have readily and creatively appropriated it into its practices.

The manifestations of online Christianity detailed here have been: cyberchurches, church-like entities that exist solely on the Internet and have no real world equivalent structure; Evangelism, online witnessing or “sharing the gospel” through online formats; and online Christian Communities, Internet-based gatherings around a focused issue of faith allowing two-way interaction. This study has chosen to focus on the later expression. Online Christian communities are understood as interactive online groups who share a common bond of Christianity and unite through a specific faith-based discussion topic. Advantages of

¹⁰³ Rheingold, Which Part is Virtual? Which Part is Community?
<<http://www.well.com/user/hlr/tomorrow/vcreal.html>>

freedom of expression, ability to choose a community based on selection versus geography, and a level of involvement based on personal needs and desires, are some of the reasons for this growth. However, while broad generalisations and observations are often used to both support or denounce the online Christian community, substantive proof is normally lacking in the current analysis and conclusions made about the Christian online community. It is the goal of this study to analyse the development and phenomena of online Christian community, and provide factual data to support claims made. Chapter four introduces the methodology and research strategy utilised in this study in the effort to identify characteristics of online Christian community and make claims concerning its effect on the offline church.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: A CASE FOR CASE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

“Each different discipline fails to see something that another discipline sees very well. We need to think as a team here, across boundaries of academic discipline, industrial affiliation, and nation to understand, and thus perhaps regain control of, the way human communities are being transformed by communication technologies. We can’t do this solely as dispassionate observers, although there is certainly a huge need for detached assessment of the social science. But community is a matter of the heart and the gut as well as the head. Some of the most important learning will always have to be done by jumping into one corner or another of cyberspace, living there, and getting up to your elbows in the problems that virtual communities face.”

- Howard Rheingold, *A Slice of Life in my Virtual Community*¹

At hundreds of computer screens scattered throughout the globe, individuals are logging on to their email accounts and reading through daily postings of an email list. Some individuals are lurking in the shadows of these groups, reading but not posting anything, their names only known to the computer, which facilitates subscriptions to the list. Others have become well known characters as frequent posters, ready to add their comments, encouragement or critique to what ever is the hot topic of discussion. The mainstay contributors regularly add their input on certain subjects. Then there are those who contribute in spurts, frequently posting for a time to then fade into the electronic woodwork. Finally there are “the core” individuals who oversee the technical running of the group and provide guidance to the topics of discussion. All of these are members of the same community. They gather in different places, at different times: alone, yet together. These online communities are drawn together for a common purpose, and sustained by connections made possible through electronic technologies.

In returning to the thesis statement first presented in the introduction,

This thesis will investigate Christian online communities, with special emphasis on studying the nature of community in cyberspace. The purpose is to identify characteristics of community individuals highlight about the online setting, showing

¹Howard Rheingold, ‘A Slice of Life in my Virtual Community’, in *Global Networks, Computers and International Communication*, ed. by Linda Harasim (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 80.

possible implications for individuals in the “real world” church and off-line communities.

Studying characteristics of online communities and how individuals form and sustain relationships within them reveals how many people understand what it means to be part of a community in both on and offline settings. Looking at the existence and growth of online Christian communities also provides a critique of the Christian church, as many comment certain attributes of community are more prevalent in their online communities than in their local places of worship.

As stated in the introduction the central questions in this study are:

What does online communication offer individual Christians and groups of Christians? How is the Internet changing Christians’ interaction with the real world Christian Church?

At the heart of these questions is the search to identify what needs online Christian community is meeting for individuals and how the Internet is changing some Christians’ approach and interaction with offline Christian community or the Church. In order to answer these questions the general topics of community, the Internet and online community were explored.

The first three chapters provided foundational information and background. Chapter one offered a review of theological and sociological views of community. From this exploration, community is being defined as a network of relationships between individuals connecting to a common purpose, whose bonds are created and sustained through shared traits or beliefs. Chapter two presented an overview of Internet development and the concept of cyberspace. Through this presentation the Internet is referred to as the “network of connected networks” linking various forms of technology through computer networks, providing the hardware and structure to the online world. Cyberspace is defined as a metaphorical space behind the computer screen, laden with distinct interpretations of what is real and what is virtual in the technological world. Chapter three provided details about online community and how Christian rituals and practices have been transferred into the online context. From this survey online community is defined as individuals who assemble through Internet technology and form a network of interdependent relationships based on care and communication.

The literature review leads to an ethnographic study based on three case studies of email-based Christian online communities. These case studies look at the relationships and communication habits within these groups in an effort to identify connections made between “online” and “real world” communities and address the stated research questions. The information from chapters one through three aided in developing the research questions to be utilised as evaluative tools in the case studies, which will be the focus of the remainder of this study.

In this chapter the research strategy and methodology of this study are outlined. First, a brief overview of research already conducted in the area of online communities is given. Secondly, a description of case study methodology is detailed. Thirdly, a detailed description of how case study methodology has been applied is outlined. Fourthly, ethical implications of using this methodology in the online environment are discussed. Fifthly, the three online community case studies are introduced and reasons given for their selection. Finally, the evaluation strategy and research questions for the case studies are presented.

OVERVIEW OF ONLINE COMMUNITY RESEARCH

The emergence of the Internet has created a fascinating new area for study, creating new possibilities for inexpensive and fast access to a myriad of newly formed social groups. As introduced in chapter two, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) refers to technology that allows individuals to communicate through the medium of the computer. Individuals utilise various computer hardware and software to transmit and receive exchange messages based on text, images and even sound over great distances, or with those sitting beside them, with relative ease and efficiency. CMC is defined by John December as, “a process of human communication via computers, involving people, situated in particular contexts, engaging in processes to shape media for a variety of purposes”.² Computers serving as intermediaries in the communication process create a new context devoid of face-to-face contact. This combination of “real” and “virtual” introduces a unique range of methodological issues, with which the researcher must engage. CMC also involves a process of capturing, storing, reproducing and delivering data with the computer mediating these coded messages.

²John December, ‘Notes on Defining of Computer-Mediated Communication’, at *Computer-Mediated Communication Magazine*, 4 (January 1997) accessed 4 November 1997
<<http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1997/jan/december.html>>

With computers serving as intermediaries, individuals involved in this process must be familiar with the codes or language they utilise. Since this process is void of face-to-face contact many critics label it a de-personalising form of communication. Yet it is important to acknowledge, though the process is void of face-to-face contact, the human element is not altogether absent. It is humans who produce and shape the communication. Therefore, CMC is “situated in a human context in which symbol manipulation is always under the direction of human beings”.³

CMC research includes studies of the product as well as the process. Akin to work done in such areas as urban studies, which came out of sociology and community studies, CMC often is defined by a set of issues. Social science research on CMC began to appear in the 1970s, when it focused primarily on the technological capabilities of computers by exploring how particular technical, economic and ergonomic characteristics of computers effected organisational efficiency and effectiveness.⁴ In the 1980s researchers began to study the “social psychological” side of CMC as behavioural psychologists and sociologists pursued issues of psychological, social and cultural significance. It was recognised within computer networks that “technological functions do not exist in isolation...Each technical component may be part of a larger context or may trigger certain social psychological processes”.⁵ The impact of instantaneous electronic communication on worker communicative habits, the lack of social cues and status cues in CMC, and social anonymity in communication became key areas of study in social psychological studies of CMC.

In the middle to late 1980s the area of social context studies in CMC began to gain recognition. Context, according to Martin Lea, is not fixed in CMC, but evolving. In this approach researchers recognise “CMC is embedded in a dynamic reciprocal relationship with context”.⁶ So the phenomenon of communication cannot be separated from the communication environment. Social context research was rigorously pursued in studies of CMC in the areas of: groups norms and social identity; social identity within communities of users; structural, relational and physical proximity among groups; communication network features; and thresholds for work groups’ cohesion and group size.⁷

³ December, <<http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1997/jan/december.html>>

⁴ For a concise literature review consult: Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, pp. 1123-1134.

⁵ Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, p. 1124.

⁶ Martin Lea, “Introduction,” in *Contexts of Computer Mediated Communication*, p. 1.

⁷ For a general survey of documented research consult: Chapters 1 & 5, *Contexts of Computer Mediated Communication*, ed. by. Martin Lea, (London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1992)

By the 1990s CMC matured into a multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary field, bringing into the dialogue policy makers, IT professionals, social and cultural scholars and media persons. Researchers brought the tools of their specific discipline, such as sociology or artificial intelligence, into the general field of study adding a variety of perspectives to the discussion. Sherry Turkle exemplifies this in her work *Life on the Screen*, integrating psychotherapy and psychology into studies on how computers influence ideas of mind, body and self. Also illustrating this trend is the McLuhan Program's work at the University of Toronto which links studies on technologies of language and writing with an exploration of new technologies and their social impact. CMC research propositions, models and investigations are diverse. Yet, according to many researchers, there is still "little theoretical or empirical research in this area".⁸ Diversity also caused a splintering of emphasis creating spin-off groups of study such as Social Informatics, the analytical study of the design, uses and social implications of information/communication technologies.

Many CMC studies in the 1990s focused on various facets of online communities, ranging from describing patterns of life found on MUDs or MOOs such as described by Bruckman⁹ and Mnookin¹⁰, to the development of community on Usenet and IRC systems done by individuals such as Reid¹¹. Many researchers were drawn to investigate these groups because they included a unique mixing of aspects of the "real" social world with a computer-created "virtual" world. This intersection creates what some have referred to as an "identity workshop"¹², an opportunity for individuals to create new personas and relationships utilising options often unavailable to them in their embodied social context. As Paccagnella states, "Cyberspace constitutes a wonderful example of how people can build relationships and social norms that are absolutely real and meaningful even in the absence of physical, touchable matter."¹³

⁸Ronald E. Rice, 'Contexts of Research on Organizational Computer-mediated Communication', in *Contexts of Computer Mediated Communication*, ed. by Martin Lea (London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 137.

⁹Amy Bruckman and Mitchel Resnick, 'The MediaMOO Project: Constructionism and Professional Community', in *Convergence*, 1.1 (Spring 1995) accessed 20 February 1999 <<http://www.cc.gatech.edu/fac/Amy.Bruckman/papers/index.html#convergence>>

¹⁰Jennifer Mnookin, 'Virtual(ly) Law: The Emergence of Law in LamdaMOO', at *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 2 (June 1996) accessed 14 June 1998 <<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue1/>>

¹¹Elizabeth Reid, 'Virtual Worlds: Culture and Imagination', in *CyberSociety*, ed. by Steven Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 164-183.

¹²Parks and Floyd, p. 83.

¹³Luciano Paccagnella, 'Getting the Seat of Your Pants Dirty: Strategies for Ethnographic research on Virtual Communities', at *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 3.1 (June 1997) accessed 10 February 1999 <<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue1/paccagnella.html>>

In the late 1990s the issue of social interaction became a focus in CMC research, seeing the “distinct cultures that emerge in CMC are grounded in communicative practice”.¹⁴ From this has grown the study of the emergence of community in the CMC context. Questions of communication of social information, group meanings and identities, forms of relationship and social negotiation are explored. While past research in CMC has often been task-oriented and laboratory-based this research is typically ethnographic and microanalytic, as illustrated by Jennifer Mnookin’s study of the emergence of law in LamdaMOO¹⁵. This naturalistic analysis poses challenges as researchers deal with issues of “going native” and “role conflict”. Yet these studies have been helpful in identifying patterns of communication structures and group relationships.

One of the dominant approaches researchers have taken in the study of online communities is an ethnographic approach. Several well known works have been produced in the 1990s. The forerunner being Rheingold’s seminal work *Virtual Communities* in which he outlines life on the WELL in the San Francisco Bay area, USA. Other noteworthy studies are Tamir Maltz’s work¹⁶ on MUDs, and Judith Donath’s work¹⁷ on Usenet communities. Common approaches include fieldwork conducted within the online community, and researcher as participant-observer.

Many of these studies focus on involvement and even immersion in a given online community in order to better understand and explain its social structure and issues of identity. Narratives and sharing community stories have become popular ways to present findings. Some studies tend towards journalistic profile accounts such as John Seabrook’s *Deeper*¹⁸ about his first two years of life online, or Julian Dibble’s *My Tiny Life*¹⁹, chronicling his experience in LamdaMOO and the infamous account of cyberspace rape. Others have been topic related studies on issues such as gender or power relations. Profiling

¹⁴Nancy Baym, ‘Interpreting Soap Operas and Creating Community: Inside an Electronic Fan Culture’, in *Culture of the Internet*, ed. by Sara Kiesler (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associate Publishers, 1997), p. 139.

¹⁵Jennifer Mnookin, <<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue1/>>

¹⁶Tamir Maltz, ‘Customary Law & Power in Internet Communities’, at *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 2 (June 1996) accessed 10 February 1999
<<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue1/custom.html>>

¹⁷Judith S. Donath, ‘Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community’, in *Communities in Cyberspace*. ed. by P. Kollock & M. Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), found online at:

<<http://persona.www.media.mit.edu/judith/Identity/IdentityDeception.html>>

¹⁸John Seabrook, *Deeper* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997)

¹⁹Julian Dibble, *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999)

an exemplar group is a typical approach, such as Nancy Baym's study of fan culture and newsgroups²⁰ or Hampton and Wellman's study of the Toronto wired suburb²¹.

At the dawn of the 21st century David Hakken in *Cyborg@cyberspace* identified six levels of analysis in current cyberspace studies: 1) the "entity" question—looking at cyborgs, 2) the self-identity issue—issue of identity unique to cyberspace, 3) micro or close level social relations—individuals' relationships online, 4) meso or intermediate level social relations—community online connection 5) macro level social relations—issues of global culture and 6) political economy structure of cyberspace—looking at overall structures of cyberspace.²² Hakken says identifying the level of inquiry a researcher wishes to explore helps focus their research framework and cyberspace fieldwork to answer the question of what it means to be human in new spaces. Ethnography, he explains, is about giving pictures of people by searching "for ways to observe directly and meaningfully the practices of interest, not just talk about them with the participants and... find ways to participate actively in the practices".²³ Limiting themselves to one or two levels enables cyberspace ethnographers to focus their research narratives and conclusions, rather than make vague or broad generalisations. Hakken claims that because there is still "no single appropriate way to enter the field," diverse approaches should be encouraged as long as they are clearly defined and explained.

Following Hakken's advice this study focuses on his 3rd and 4th levels of analysis. Primary emphasis is on the meso level of community relationships, and micro social relations of individual connections are considered as they support this level. This is done through an ethnographic approach, which is noted in the next section as one of four emergent trends in religious CMC research.

THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS CMC RESEARCH

In the 1990s interest and scholarly study of CMC within theological and religious studies disciplines began to surface. Issues such as the authenticity of online relationships, effects of disembodied communication and the potential of online interactions to replace face-to-face

²⁰ Baym, pp. 103-120.

²¹ Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman, 'Netville On-Line and Off-Line', in *American Behavioural Scientist*, 43.3 (November 1999), pp. 478-495.

²² David Hakken, *Cyborg@cyberspace An Ethnographer Looks at the Future* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 7-11.

²³ Hakken, p. 39.

communication have become areas of concern for Christians researchers and theologians such as Houston, Brooke and Gene Veith²⁴. The use of Internet technology by traditional religions for spiritual pursuits has also become an area of interest, exemplified by Gary Bunt's work on Islam in Cyberspace²⁵ and Joshua Hammerman's writing on Judaism Online²⁶. CMC researchers interested in religion online have taken a number of different approaches, which can be broadly described as Observational Analysis, Philosophical-Theological Examination, Theoretical Development and Social Ethnography.

OBSERVATIONAL ANALYSIS

Observational analysis focuses on the general phenomenon of cyber-religion, evaluating the extent of its influence by taking a survey analysis approach. This combines web sites analysis with online observation and interviews of webmasters and users. These projects offer either reflection on how specific religions are being transformed online or broad observations on the overall phenomenon of cyber-religion. The key question being asked is how the Internet is shaping individual religious beliefs and practices.

An example of observational analysis is Brenda Brasher's work *Give Me That Online Religion*. Her central thesis is that religious expression online should be protected and supported because religious people and their traditions "make a valuable, necessary contribution to civil society" and online religion is crucial for the positive future of religion.²⁷ She argues cyber-religion is invigorating concepts of sacred time and spiritual experience by offering snapshots of web sites dealing with Y2K prophecies and descriptions of virtual shrines, along with essays of individuals' cyber-pilgrimages. In essence she gives a virtual tour of spiritual expression online, providing justification for her argument that cyberspace is a public domain fit for religious expression. Observational analysis provides broad surveys of online examples to illustrate or answer general questions about online religion.

²⁴ Consult: Gene Edward Veith and Christopher L Stamper, *Christians in a.com World: Getting Connected without Being Consumed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000)

²⁵ Gary Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Lampeter, Wales: University of Wales Press, 2000)

²⁶ Consult: Joshua Hammerman, *thelordismyshepherd.com: Seeking God in Cyberspace* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Simcha Press, 2000)

²⁷ Brasher, p. 11.

PHILOSOPHICAL-THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION

Philosophical-Theological examinations investigate foundational philosophical issues raised by the Internet and how technology can be used to reconnect people to religious ideas or beliefs. These studies draw heavily on literature reviews and historical surveys of underlying theories and spiritual concepts emanating through the computer technology. They often focus on a single issue or concept, such as grace or conceptions of space, and examine how the digital world re-informs them or calls for their re-examination.

Two clear examples of this approach are the works of Margaret Wertheim and Jennifer Cobb, mentioned in chapter three. In *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*²⁸ Wertheim, explores the historic development of conceptions of space using Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the artwork of Giotto and the writing of Nicholas of Cusa. She argues cyberspace revives a medieval understanding of physical and spiritual space, in which the immaterial soul was central. Jennifer Cobb attempts to create a "theology of Cyberspace" by exploring the Internet as a spiritual network. In *Cybergrace* she brings together de Chardin's noosphere, Whitehead's process theology and chaos theory, painting cyberspace as a place for society to find healing by reconnecting the spheres of science and religion. These examples show Philosophical-Theological examinations draw on extensive literature reviews to build their arguments; online examples are given as illustration of the specific concept being argued.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Theoretical Development recognises the need for tested conceptual frameworks to be developed in order to interpret empirical data emerging in CMC studies. These studies are based on recognised communication theories such as Semiology (F. de Saussure) or Social Interactionism (G. H. Mead) and original empirical online studies. Empirical observation is used to test and refine the theoretical perspective being developed. These studies emphasise developing a research framework with which other data can be tested and interpreted.

Professor Alf Linderman and Mia Lövheim of Uppsala University (Sweden) exemplify this in their work researching religious identity and community formation online. One of their projects is application and adaptation of Social Semiology for the online context. Employing aspects of Mead's work on Interactions with Social Semiology they have developed a model

²⁸ Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* (London: Virago, 1999)

investigating issues of meaning and identity construction. In their initial study, this model was applied to interviews with webmasters of traditional and non-traditional religious web sites.²⁹ Their continued work seeks to outline how religion and CMC affects existing theories about late modernity and media reception studies. Theoretical Development is vital as little work has been done to establish credible and tested frameworks for studies of method and ethical questions in cyberculture.

SOCIAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Social Ethnography focuses on the empirical exploration of issues such as social information and social negotiation. It involves a variety of research techniques such as online observation/participation and comparison of findings with other cyberculture studies. This research is microanalytic and ethnographic, often involving the in-depth analysis of a single online community, as illustrated by Schroeder, Heather & Lee's study of prayer in a multi-user virtual reality environment.³⁰ Though some researchers have taken this approach in exploring online religious practice and groups, yet few in-depth examples are available within strictly Christian CMC studies.

This thesis has taken a social ethnographic approach in investigating online community relationships, a methodology effective for drawing conclusions on how online relationships influence involvement within offline communities and the Church. Social ethnography demonstrates that the religious community benefits from asking how online engagement may shape peoples' views and interaction with the Church. More ethnographic studies, such as the one outlined this chapter, should be carried out by researchers in order to uncover what effect online religion has on society. This next section describes how case study methodology within an ethnographic study is understood and applied in this thesis.

CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

Case study as a methodology has been utilised in a wide variety of research fields, from clinical medicine to social work. Researchers using this methodology focus on a specific

²⁹ Alf Linderman and Mia Lovheim, 'Internet and Religion. The Making of Meaning, Identity and Community through Computer Mediated Communication' (unpublished paper presented to the *Media, Religion and Culture Conference*, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1998)

³⁰ Ralph Schroeder, Noel Heather and Raymond M. Lee, 'The Sacred and the Virtual: Religion in Multi-User Virtual Reality', at *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 4.2 (December 1998) accessed 17 February 1998 <<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol4/issue2/schroeder.html#LANGUAGE>>

“case” which is studied utilising an interpretative or meaning-centred framework. In *Real World Research*, Colin Robson provides the following definition:

*Case study is a strategy for doing research, which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.*³¹

Robson goes on to unpack this definition saying case study starts with a strategy, a specific approach used, such as observation or interview. Case study is also concerned with the particular, a specific case. It focuses on a phenomenon in a given context and uses multiple methods of evidence or data collection.³²

The contemporary phenomenon being studied can be almost anything, such as individuals, groups, or events. By looking at multiple sources of evidence during the empirical investigation both quantitative and qualitative data can be collected by utilising various strategies from surveys to interviews and recorded observation. In employing case study methodology several aspects need to be identified and defined: the conceptual framework, research questions, a sampling strategy and data collection techniques. Robson states that the conceptual framework of a case study outlines the key features of the study and their presumed relationships. Working like a map, the framework diagrams the issues and how they may interact in the study, allowing the researcher to assess where the research might lead and draw theoretical formulations.

Linked to the conceptual framework should be a set of research questions central to the study, which direct the way in which the research design should proceed. They serve as a point of reference and focus the task so the data collected will be relevant to answer the questions. These two areas provide the “why” of the case study. The sampling strategy, outlining the “who”, “what”, “where” and “when” of the case study, deals with selecting the specific case to be studied. Sampling parameters are established by the settings, actors, events and processes selected, which in turn shape the study. Effects of the samplings chosen need to be considered and re-evaluated during the study, as well as during the process of constructing a data collection technique which, with case studies, commonly includes observation, interviews, use of documents and records or a combination thereof.

³¹Colin Robson, *Real World Research* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 5.

³²Robson, p. 52.

The case study approach is a “continuing” process allowing modification or change in focus during research. This fits in well with the understanding of online communities as loosely bound, frequently changing networks. Case studies also provide more detailed descriptions, giving a wider picture of the context of the study than is often afforded in quantitative research. Interviews and observations yield “thick” and “rich” data.³³ Therefore, case study methodology is especially appropriate for this particular research project. As Robson stated, “If your main concern is in understanding what is happening in a specific context and if you can get access to and co-operation from the people involved--then do a case study.”³⁴

However, conducting a case study in the online context does raise some unique issues. Robert Yin in *Case Study Research: Designs and Methods* offers a definition of case study that emphasises the usefulness of case study methods “especially when the boundaries between phenomena are not clearly evident”.³⁵ Yin’s definition points to a key issue in the area of CMC research, the issue of “context”. Chapters three and four have already highlighted that the phenomena of online communities and the context of cyberspace are often areas with fuzzy boundaries.

Case studies consider a phenomenon in a specific context. Therefore, using case studies allows the CMC phenomenon and context to be considered together. Fulk, Schmitz and Schwarz in “The dynamics of context-behaviour interaction in computer-mediated communication” outline four propositions for consideration when conducting CMC research: (1) Research should be context-specific rather than generalisable. (2) A context is dynamic with its own history. (3) Human actions alter contexts that help fashion social reality. (4) Contexts are rarely adequately defined and measured as a single level of analysis.³⁶ These propositions further support the use of case study methodology in CMC work.

Context specific research allows the researcher to consider how participants in a certain social CMC network “create a shared reality” which affects all members of the network. It

³³ Other strengths of case study methodology are that it allows the researcher to work in close proximity to the subjects being studied instead of standing at arm’s length, as in classic experimentation techniques. Case study field research allows intimate acquaintance with the subject studied rather than knowledge acquired from a distance. Proximity helps the researcher to be accepted into the scene under study so ordinary behaviour can be observed first hand rather than relying on controlled interviews or experimental interventions for data. The longitudinal nature of case studies can allow the researcher to incorporate a historical dimension.

³⁴ Robson, p. 168.

³⁵ Robert Yin in *Case Study Research. Designs and Methods* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), p. 13.

³⁶ Janet Fulk, Joseph Schmitz and Deanne Schwarz, ‘The dynamics of context-behaviour interaction in computer-mediated communication’, in *Contexts of Computer Mediated Communication*, ed. by Martin Lea (London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 8.

is recognised that life in an online community is a co-created reality, and history entwines the individual context with that of the group so “they can’t be considered independently”.³⁷ This reality dictates researcher consideration of multiple approaches to present the required full picture. The issue of context is important in CMC as in other fields of research; “it is critical for newcomers to learn this (historical) social context from old timers in order to make sense of their ‘new’ organisation”.³⁸

In this study the contemporary phenomenon is emergence of the online community. Proposed for this study is a triangulation method to gather quantitative and qualitative data. This includes participant-observation in selected online communities, analysis of documents related to these communities, email questionnaires soliciting information about individual members and communal relations, and finally face-to-face interviews and observations of various members of these communities. Three online communities, all of which employ email technology, have been selected representing different expressions of Christianity (Charismatic, Evangelical and Anglican). Multiple cases generate a wider database from which patterns can be identified. This enables theoretical generalisations to be made through matching patterns of behaviour found in these communities. Emerging patterns can be connected to other known and tested general theories found in previously published CMC research. Specific research questions and data collection details are outlined later in this chapter.

Case study methodology appears a useful way to investigate the online community within the realm of CMC. An overview of how case study methodology is being applied to this study has been described. The next section details the complete research strategy of this project.

APPLICATION OF CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY IN THIS RESEARCH

The aim of this study is to explore the relationships and communication habits occurring within Christian online email communities. It is the intent of this section to clearly outline the general research methodology and describe how it has been executed. Much of online community research has focused on MUDs or MOOs, fantasy-based virtual environments where individuals create a character and then interact with others according to their creation.

³⁷ Fulk, Schmitz and Schwarz, p. 12.

³⁸ Fulk, Schmitz and Schwarz, p. 15.

This interaction is often based on “re-presentation” of the self where hiding one’s true identity is quite easy. Issues of deception and social anonymity have been the focus of many studies.³⁹

Another focus of online community research has been interactions occurring within online “therapy” or support groups. These studies look at confession in the online environment, distinguishing fact from fiction and how and why people find support in such interactions. Discussion of these issues was heightened when a man in the USA was charged with killing his daughter, through a confession he made to an online support group which was reported to the police by the group’s moderator.⁴⁰ However few in-depth qualitative studies have been done of email communities or specifically Christian online community, making this research both unique in its strategy and topic.

Case study method has been used involving a three-phase strategy of participant-observation in an online community, questionnaire distribution to the online community and face-to-face interviews of selected members of the community. Utilising triangulation in this project’s conceptual framework enabled collection of a wide range of data on each online community. Studying a particular community from a variety of angles has helped create a holistic, rather than a fragmented picture. Each research phase served as a progression to the next, gathering data necessary for execution of each consecutive phase. The following is a summary of each phase of research.

PHASE 1- PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION

Phase one involved immersion in the online community for a set period of time. For the first case study this involved a ten-week period. After the initial study it was determined that ten weeks generated more data than were manageable or necessary to draw conclusions for the research questions, so the later two case studies involved only a six-week period each.

It is important to note that email interactions were being observed and recorded in this phase. Email is a unique type of communication: though a written exchange, it is more like conversation than letter writing or print media. Teun van Dijk explains, “turn-taking during

³⁹ Consult: Judith Donath, ‘Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community’, in *Communities in Cyberspace*. ed. by P. Kollock & M. Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), found online at: <http://persona.www.media.mit.edu/judith/Identity/IdentityDeception.html>

⁴⁰ ‘Father arraigned, held after Internet confession’, at *CNN.com* (1 May 1998) accessed 1 May 1998
<http://www10.cnn.com/US/9805/01/online.confession.update/>

online email 'talk' blurs the distinction between written and spoken discourse".⁴¹ Participants in most electronic discussions are freed "from concerns about securing turn taking and forestalling interruptions because their contributions are typed in isolation," seemingly at whatever speed or length they desire.⁴² Email allows more time for reflection when responding to a question or reacting to other individuals than a face-to-face interview or conversation. The very nature of email can often allow a richer, fuller level of dialogue. Boshier argues,

*Email appears to provide a context for the kind of non-coercive and anti-hierarchical dialogue that Habermas claimed constitutes an 'ideal speech situation', free of internal or external coercion, and characterised by equality of opportunity and reciprocity in roles assumed by participants.*⁴³

While perhaps exaggerated, as Habermas would likely shun the possibility that disembodied communication could ever fully constitute an "ideal speech act", this claim does highlight the social equalising power of email communication. Sproull and Kiesler's research in the organisational use of CMC found email helped eliminate status cues so those of lower social status were more likely to contribute to an electronic discussion than they typically would in a face-to-face group.⁴⁴

All interactions between the researcher and the online community were noted. A research diary was kept of all personal interactions made by the researcher with the community. Reflection on events happening within the community, especially as they related to the research questions, was also noted. A log of all emails posted to the list during this observation period was also kept. All emails were read and recorded, with the content of significant posts being analysed in-depth and noted in the diary.

Permission was obtained to be involved in the group as a researcher from the list moderator or owner and this position was openly disclosed to the group. By contacting the list moderator/owner by personal email, the intentions of the study were disclosed. After obtaining approval from the list moderator/owner a "de-lurking" email was sent to the list announcing the research project, the length and dates of the observation period and the

⁴¹ Teun A. van Dijk, 'Discourse as Interaction in Society', in *Discourse as Social Interaction* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p.4.

⁴² Candace West, Michelle M. Lazar and Cheris Kramarae, 'Gender in Discourse', in *Discourse as Social Interaction* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p. 138.

⁴³ Roger Boshier, 'Social-psychological Factors in Electronic Networking', in the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 9.1 (1990), p. 51.

⁴⁴ Sproull and Kiesler, p. 61.

announcement that this would be followed by a request for volunteers to respond to a questionnaire dealing with their community. Community members were invited to respond privately with any questions. In each of the case studies numerous “welcoming” emails were received, yet none voiced any objections or questions concerning the researcher’s presence.

The citing and quoting of material was done in accordance with group protocol procedures and all appropriate permissions were obtained from those who made the respective email posts. Participant-observation online raises ethical and methodological issues; hence the coverage on issues such as lurking and self-disclosure will be discussed later in this chapter.

PHASE 2- QUESTIONNAIRE/SURVEY

Phase two involved distributing an Internet questionnaire to members of the community at the conclusion of the observation period. Email has quickly become preferred over “snail mail” as a method of gathering survey questionnaire data. One of its most noteworthy features is the high response rate often reported to email questionnaires. In 1992 a comparison study of response rates found a survey administered to AT& T employees generated a 68 percent return through email and only a 36 percent return rate through standard mail. Yet, other studies have concluded email and postal response rates are comparable. Factors influencing results seem tied to the technologically savvy/experience of respondents.⁴⁵ Other advantages noted for email surveys include ease of distribution and quick response times, both decisive factors in the decision to use email questionnaires for this study. One disadvantage of email surveys is that “ensuring respondents’ anonymity is virtually impossible” due to the fact responses typically will include the email address of the respondent.⁴⁶ However, since this study involved specified groups of people and it has already been noted that names and emails were not used in quoting material, this was not an issue.

Questionnaires were distributed in email format. They were standardised, pre-tested and remained the same for all three case studies, with slight alteration of wording personalising them to each community. Questionnaires had three sections composed of fill-in-the-blank,

⁴⁵ For a survey of findings consult: Christine Smith, ‘Casting the Net: Surveying Internet Populations’, at *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 3.1 (June 1997) accessed 10 February 1999 <<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue1/smith.html>>

⁴⁶ Neil Selwyn and Kate Robson, ‘Using e-mail as a research tool’, at *Social Research Update*, 21 (Summer 1998) accessed 10 February 1999 <<http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU21.html>>

open-ended short answer questions and range response questions. The first section gathered demographic information (age, sex, denomination, and number of hours spent on the WWW and email, etc.). The second section asked questions relating to respondents' involvement in the specific online community (why they had joined, how they saw their role in the community, comparison of their involvement in the community to their involvement in the Church, etc.). The third section asked questions relating to Internet and email usage (were they involved in other online communities, how did Internet use influence their daily lives, etc.). Finally, all respondents were asked if they would give permission for email posts they made during the case study to be cited in the research, either anonymously or through simply noting initials.

To gather volunteers, an email was sent to each online community asking those willing to respond to the questionnaire to contact the researcher via personal email. The email questionnaire was then sent privately to respondents. In the later two case studies the initial response was quite low so additional email requests were sent to the list to encourage more volunteers to participate. This raised some interesting issues dealing with how individuals view community membership and how they treat outsiders. These issues will be discussed more in detail in the individual case study chapters.

PHASE 3- FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with selected members of each community at the conclusion of the observation period. Three or four individuals were selected from among questionnaire respondents for these interviews. Selection was based on the level of community participation, how "typical" they were of the other community members (based on profiles constructed from analysing questionnaire data), and willingness to be involved in the interview research. Geographic location of respondents also influenced selection. Due to funding and time constraints only community members in Britain and North America (the USA and Canada) were selected. While it could be argued that selection based on an element of convenience could yield an unrepresentative sample, it should be noted that the majority of members of the three online communities were North American-based. Thus conducting the majority of interviews in the USA was in relation to the geographic representation of the groups.

Some researchers believe interviews relating to ethnographic studies online should be conducted within the online setting in which the researcher and subject are immersed. These

in-depth interviews often take the form of email exchanges or IRC conversations, which are logged by the researcher. Commenting on this issue one online researcher remarked,

*If you're truly trying to get a deep understanding about the online community/environment, then I think that it would be wise to keep the experience totally online. Face-to-face interviews will introduce a bias into your analysis that might not have been there previously...which might not be an accurate portrayal of the online research.*⁴⁷

While using email as an interview tool does provide a common ground for interviewee and researcher, valuable non-verbal data are also lost. Advantages and disadvantages of both approaches must be considered when making decisions about where interviews will be conducted. A face-to-face encounter might harm a researcher's relationship with an online community, or it could provide valuable data, enabling them to check perceptions and conclusions. Selwyn and Robson sum up this dilemma by saying email "eschews the conventional constraints of spatial and temporal proximity between interviewer and respondent and offers the considerable practical advantage of providing 'ready-transcribed' data. However, email interviews suffer from a lack of tacit communication".⁴⁸

For this research project, interviews were conducted in the community member's home territory, typically in their home. Interview length varied, ranging from four hours to two and a half days. Length depended on interview location, travel time, the interviewee timetable, the extent of their comments, and whether or not the interview included a visit to the interviewee's local church. The intent was not only to verify the online data and information collected about the individuals, but also to observe their Internet usage habits and in several cases visit members' local places of worship in order to see how technology influences their real world lives.

The decision to conduct face-to-face interviews was based on the need to determine and verify that connections are being made between online and "real world" communities to which individual members belong. How members' involvement in an online community affects their involvement in their real world church communities can not be completely verified through online contact. Face-to-face data, as well as visiting their local place of worship were worth pursuing. Interviews also involved meeting the respondent's family and

⁴⁷ Email from Electronic Communication and Culture List, from Joan Biddle, Date sent: Fri, 06 Nov 1998 10:39:17 -0500, To: ecc@lists.colorado.edu, Subject: Re: Participant/Observation in an Online Context

⁴⁸ Selwyn and Robson, <<http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU21.html>>

friends, to relieve apprehension of spouses about an unknown “Internet friend” being invited into their home, often for an extended period. Observing and discussing Internet usage habits with the interviewee and with friends or family was a feature of many of the interviews. This immersion in the lives of the given members enabled verification of data gathered during the first two phases.

This research methodology overview provides the general outline of how the three case studies were conducted. In summary, to better describe three Christian email-based online communities this research project deployed a three-phase strategy to collect data in both online and offline contexts. This has been done to define the characteristics of Christian online communities and how an individual’s involvement online influences their real world interactions with the Church. Special facets concerning the implementation of the research phases are discussed in each case study chapter. Because the territory of cyberspace and the technology of the Internet introduce a new set of challenges for researchers, several ethical implications of the methodological use of case study online and the ethnographic approach are highlighted in the next section.

ETHICAL ISSUES SURROUNDING ONLINE RESEARCH

Fieldwork in the online setting brings with it a special set of ethical concerns including obtaining permission to conduct research, the level of researcher involvement in online communities and issues of anonymity and privacy. The first issue confronted is obtaining permission from groups under study. One approach is simply to seek consent from the list owner on behalf of the group, a recommendation made by Schroder, Heather and Lee in their study of the social interactions within the virtual reality environment. They argue,

Although it is not entirely clear that those who “own” or “manage” groups can give consent on behalf of others, we sought and obtained the co-operation and agreement of the person leading the prayer meetings before we proceeded to analyse the data. Where material is quoted we have tried to do so in a manner that does not permit the identification of participants.⁴⁹

In the context of the email lists studied here, gaining permission from the list moderator or administrator allowed easy access into the groups. After obtaining permission via email, a public post was made to the list announcing the researcher’s presence and outlining the purpose, intention and length of research. Information about the researcher and related work

⁴⁹ Schroeder, Heather and Lee, <<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol4/issue2/schroeder.html#LANGUAGE>>

was made accessible to the community through the researcher's personal web page.

Community members were given notice one week prior to the beginning of a case study to contact the researcher with any questions or concerns. This provided a smooth transition from lurker to an acknowledged researcher in the given online community.

Once permission is obtained and access gained, the researcher must decide on the level of involvement they will have online based on a close examination of the specific community under study. As Schroder, Heather and Lee commented,

Participant observation and data capture will surely come to complement one another in the social study of online behaviour in virtual worlds, but this area of study - unlike purely text-based online interaction - is for the moment too novel to be able to say which research methods will be most useful and appropriate.⁵⁰

The first case study involved participant-observation in a 10-week "course" being run by the online community. Selecting the email partner option enabled interaction one-to-one with a wide range of community members with whom the researcher was paired each week for discussions, while remaining silent on the general community list. Being the researcher's first experience as part of an email list this forced interaction was very beneficial. A personal diary recording feelings and interactions with the online community was kept. Yet the researcher continually had to clarify and re-state their position as a researcher with email partners and other members, especially those who shared quite personal information with the researcher.

In the second case study, due to the intimate nature of the community, the position of a lurker was chosen, solving the researcher's internal struggles with trying to maintain objective distance from the group and not feel participation was influencing the conversation. However, when it came to the phase two questionnaire, another problem was encountered, a low return and response rate. This community, which could be characterised as a support group, tended to associate participation with group membership. Therefore the group might not consider the lurker a "true member", though the individuals might conceive of themselves as part of the community. The researcher as observer could be seen as a non-member role and therefore solicit mistrust by the group. For the third case study the position of "observer as participant" was selected. This involved an announced presence and

⁵⁰ Schroeder, Heather and Lee, <<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol4/issue2/schroeder.html#LANGUAGE>>

occasional email posts to the list to ensure members were aware of the researcher presence, but the primary position was that of a lurker.

The third ethical consideration was how information obtained online would be cited. Online researchers' general attitude seems to be that private communications require permission from the author/originator, while public communications are seen as fair game, a position taken by Schroeder, Heather and Lee:

Some kinds of communication are clearly bounded; electronic mail sent between two individuals is generally considered to be private and cannot be reproduced without their permission. On the other hand, where one has an open distribution system, as is the case for much of the information on the World Wide Web, few problems may arise in the reproduction of posted materials.⁵¹

Realising the Internet is a social space; the researcher is able to apply similar guidelines to those used in face-to-face research. The common approach is to disguise the identity of the research group to the best of the researchers' ability, substituting coded names for actual ones. Online this would include changing online tags or nicknames as these created identities can be as well known as an individual's true name. Paccagnella writes, "Changing not only real names, but also aliases or pseudonyms (where used) proves the respect of the researcher for the social reality of cyberspace."⁵² This study has attempted to veil community identity by changing its name and excluding other details that would give immediate recognition to them by outsiders. Members' names have not been used in any material quoted from email posts, questionnaires or interviews. Either pseudonyms or initials with gender and geographic references were used to denote their identity.

This section has presented three ethical areas that were addressed in this research project. This has been done to show that cyberspace not only presents researchers with a new space to define, they must also learn to live in a space governed by new rules and ways of being. Next a synopsis of each case study is given.

CASE STUDY PROFILES

It is difficult to get an accurate assessment of the scope of the online population. According to a Matrix Information and Directory Services survey in June 1998, 102 million individuals

⁵¹ Schroeder, Heather and Lee, <<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol4/issue2/schroeder.html#LANGUAGE>>

⁵² Paccagnella, <<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue1/paccagnella.html>>

worldwide had gone online. This number is estimated to reach 707 million by the end of 2001.⁵³ The Net is still US-centric, CommerceNet reported in June 1999; 92 million users 16 years old and older are accessing the Internet in America.⁵⁴ European users are estimated at 59 million currently, according to Nua Internet Survey reports, with 121 million expected online by 2004.⁵⁵

It has also been difficult to obtain an overall picture of Christian online community. There are no specific demographics available as to the number of "Christian" users or Christian online communities available at this time. While there are several web pages and resource books available to help one locate various Christian activities happening on the web, there is no single directory source for locating Christian email based groups.⁵⁶ In order to get a sense of the scope of online Christian communities, much time was spent during the first years of research conducting periodic web searches on various religious and general search engines under such topics as "Christian" or "Christian Communities" or "Christian Online Communities". However, another difficulty is that many email lists, unless they have an introductory web site or an online archive, cannot be located through a web search. Therefore, most online email-based groups located have come through referrals from various online contacts or through coming across a web page by chance during a web search which referred to a specific online group with contact information.

In order to narrow the case study selection, this project focuses on Christian email-based groups started at a grassroots level by individuals rather than institutions, and avoiding email lists run by a church denominations, bodies, or institutional structures. This was done to see how community emerges organically online, bottom-up, rather than how it may be imposed through an official structure. Whenever a group was located seeming to fit these criteria the researcher would join the list for several weeks or more, scanning the posts to get a sense of the group.

Over the course of study 12 different online Christian communities were joined. Three of these groups were selected for in-depth study and a brief profile of each is given in this section. Reasons for selecting these particular groups are also explained below. Yet the

⁵³ *Headcount.com*. 6 June 2001 <<http://www.headcount.com/>>

⁵⁴ *Computer Economics*. 6 June 2000 <www.computereconomics.com/new4/pr/pr990610.html>

⁵⁵ *Nua Internet Surveys*. 5 June 2001 <www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905355164&rel=true>

⁵⁶ Examples of Christian guidebooks: Jason Baker. *Christian Cyberspace Companion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995) and Mark Kellner. *God on the Internet*, (Foster City, CA: IDG Books, 1996)

general determining factors for inclusion in this study were based on levels of interaction and participation occurring within the group, consistent numbers of posts and diversity of membership in the community. Also, these groups were selected because while having similar traits and patterns of communication, each represents a different stream of Christendom: Charismatic-Pentecostalism, Evangelicalism and Anglicanism respectively. This was done to provide a breadth of coverage of online Christianity and also to show doctrinal and theological ideas of church within a real world setting influence online behaviour and practices.

THE COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY

The Community of Prophecy (CP) is an Internet-based email conference. In its charter the list is described as,

An electronic community or kinship of people who believe the Lord has given them some degree of prophetic gifting. It provides a safe(non-threatening) place to learn to walk out and grow in that prophetic anointing. It provides a place to build each other up and to encourage each other in our prophetic gifting.⁵⁷

The focus of the community is on the gift of prophecy, in the New Testament sense. A prophecy or prophetic word is defined as “that which brings edification, exhortation and comfort to people”.⁵⁸ The purpose of the community is to “build each other up and encourage each other in our prophetic gifting”. Individuals are encouraged to ask questions, to share words of knowledge, prophecy, visions and dreams they receive from God and to ask for help in interpreting these. Periodic classes are offered on various issues related to prophecy. This takes the form of email teachings posted for the given weeks of the course and discussion on those lessons taking place in an open forum. The CP also offers various sub-lists, such as on the topic of dream interpretation.

Initially, CP began as a sub-list connected to a well-known Charismatic renewal email list. However, it was not very active and while there did not seem enough people interested to keep the list going, several of its advisors did not want to “kill” it. One of these, a woman in California, felt prompted “by the Lord” to start up a new list and in the autumn of 1994 the CP was born. Introduction to the CP was through an online acquaintance. While doing

⁵⁷ Charter and list information found online at CP web site; web address has been withheld for confidentiality reasons.

⁵⁸ Email sent to CP, Date sent: Sun, 11 Jan 1998 21:26:06 -0800 (PST) Subject: Week 1 Teaching - Prophetic Training 101 Course

research on a different email list on the “Toronto Blessing” the researcher came into contact with the list moderator on another Christian email list who shared about her experiences in the Toronto renewal movement. She also gave a reference to her web site, which told more of her testimony, and of several email lists she moderated. A year later another online contact forwarded the researcher a post from the CP. Recognising the woman’s name, she was contacted again to find out more about the list. Within hours a response came back saying that being a part of it was the best way to learn more about it, so she added me to the list.

The community is overseen by a “leadership core” made up of pastors and para-church ministers from a variety of denominations who facilitate and provide direction and guidance. It is evident from posts made by the leadership core; the size of the community is steadily increasing. In November 1997 the leadership-core reported about 200 members. By the beginning of the case study in January 1998 membership had nearly doubled to around 400. At its height during the past three years of my involvement it has reached around 1200 members. Currently it is approximately around 800. The list attracts a diverse membership representing various countries with an even number of actively participating men and women. Most members are based in North America, but others come from other parts of the world such as Tasmania, Paraguay, Hungary, Norway and the Philippines.

The CP was selected as the pilot case study for several reasons. It has a diverse membership in age, sex and nationality. It is consistent and constant in its daily communication between members, about 5 to 10 posts on a typical day and 15 to 20 posts daily when certain classes are offered. It has a clear focus, community mission statement and standards of protocol and community practice, which are maintained and enforced by the group. Also, the researcher’s familiarity with Christian Charismatic/Renewal communities due to past research on this topic made it an ideal pilot study for this research project.

THE ONLINE CHURCH

The Online Church (OLC) is a general Christian mailing. The purpose of the OLC is outlined in the introductory email sent to all new subscribers:

The Online Church is a mailing list open to the public with the purpose of holding discussions relating to the Christian’s walk with God and how the Bible applies to

*every day life. Nonchristians are welcome to participate as long as their questions and comments remain within the list guidelines.*⁵⁹

This list is described as “Christian in nature and users should feel free to share personal problems, ask questions related to the Scriptures and should likewise be free to share prayer requests and praise reports”. Open to discussions of all types, including doctrinal and theological topics, a majority of posts deal with support or encouragement for individual members. The moderator made the following comment about the list,

*The list almost runs itself and I am amazed how the Lord has caused the list to grow and to expand into a truly electronic church.*⁶⁰

Individuals wishing to be part of the list must subscribe and agree to behave by some basic rules of conduct. “No profanity or unchristian conduct is allowed. In short, one damn or hell and you are off the list.” The basic behaviour rule is, “Be nice to everybody because everybody is having a tough time”.⁶¹ “Non-Christians” are welcome to participate as long as their questions and comments remain within the list guidelines.

The OLC was discovered when a research contact forwarded the researcher the web address of a server housing over a hundred email lists. This list was one of four described on the site as having a religious emphasis. After subscribing to all four lists this one seemed the most active (as two were private lists, open only to select persons and the others inactive).

The unique aspect of the OLC is a majority of individuals involved are visually impaired, giving them a common bond in the natural as well as the spiritual world. This was not evident to the researcher when initially joining the list, until after six weeks of observation discussion threads on such topics as training guide dogs and locating Braille resources online emerged. Through this the researcher became aware that a significant number of individuals spoke of being blind. After consulting the moderator’s web page it was learned he was also blind. Since the researcher had not read all the posts during this time this was not noticed sooner. The fact this was not obvious immediately and that it was difficult to distinguish those who were and were not sighted online was intriguing, adding new dimension to description of the Internet as a “blind medium”.

⁵⁹ Email sent to OLC ,Date sent: Fri, 3 Apr 1998 09:47:17 -0400, Subject: Usage guidelines for OLC-list

⁶⁰ Email sent to OLC, Date sent: Wed, 3 Jun 1998 09:06:20 -0600, Subject: watching and reading

⁶¹ OLC Introductory email for new subscribers, Date sent: Fri, 3 Apr 1998 09:47:17 -0400, Subject: Usage guidelines for OLC-list

The OLC had its beginnings in early 1990 when list founder Pete Stuart first got online through FidoNet, an earlier form of computer networking, and started his own Bulletin Board as an “electronic library” for blind people looking for information on software computer resources. Building connections with other blind people through this list, Stuart moved on a few years later to Internet involvement and chat rooms. In one particular room he met other blind Christians, who together sensed a need to open a new chat room, “an open discussion, kind of support group in a chat room of Christian related topics”. This became the first version of the Online Church.

After setting up this chat room the group began to talk about starting a mailing list. Most of the Christian discussion lists Stuart had come across focused on theology and doctrine, where “there was more debating going on in them than support”. He and others frequenting the OLC chat room were looking for something different, more like the supportive interaction they found in the chat room.

I thought, let's start one where Christians can just get together and discuss... offer prayer or make prayer requests and then just generally support each other, like a church would. And though we stray from that sometimes, that's what it's been from the very beginning.⁶²

Since Stuart had already started “Blind Exchange”, a general information list for the blind, he seemed the logical person to establish the new list. His Internet provider offered free mailing lists to subscribers, so in 1995 the OLC mailing list was set up. The initial chat room eventually closed and another opened, called Online Church, which ran for a couple of years until it became too time consuming. Stuart turned the responsibility over to another OLC list member who ran it for about another year, but it eventually phased out due to declining participation.

For the first year the OLC was very inactive, Stuart recounts; with only about 4 or 5 people subscribed. Since then the list has grown “mostly by word of mouth” as membership has stabilised. Ranging from 26 to 71 individuals, list membership averages around 35 members. Stuart says the list focus has stayed pretty much the same as people join for the “encouragement aspect of it and the fellowship, just like a church would be”. Due to an increased workload with his online business, supplying specialised software for blind

⁶² Personal Interview with Peter Stuart, Denver, Colorado (USA), 11 September 1999

computer users, in spring 1999 he turned over his moderator responsibilities to another OLC member.

The OLC is an equalising space for members, technology freeing them from physical limitations relating to their sensory impairments. This was a key reasons for desiring to study this group. Another factor contributing to its selection was the deep level of emotional support demonstrated within the community. Also, while having an evangelical tone in many of its posts the list does not represent only a single denominational focus. Relatively small, about 30 members at any given time, the list represents a wide range of Church groups, such as Pentecostal, Baptist and Catholic.

THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE

The Anglican Communion is an email list, a forum for discussing matters of interest among church members in the Anglican Communion. List members describe it as a “cyberparish”, as their web site states:

This CYBERPARISH (sometimes called the ANGLICAN COMMUNION mailing list) is, in rather formal language, a forum for discussion of matters of interest in the churches of the Anglican Communion, such as the Episcopal Church in the USA, the Church of England [and the communicants of AC, i.e., drivel, accomplishments of sons and daughters, prayer requests, rants, raves, etc., i.e., things of interest to the people that make up this very real and very human community].⁶³

Topics of discussion range from church politics and debate on liturgy to long-running exchange of “drivel”, posts that are humorous or related to puns. During the first week of observing, list subjects ranged from homosexuality in the Church, to baseball, obscenities (use of the F-word) and the education level of Episcopal Bishops. Another feature of the AC is a weekly or bi-weekly email sent to the list in the form of a liturgical prayer encompassing prayer requests shared by members.

The list generally comprises around 400 subscribers at any given point. Generating 75 to 100 messages a day, many find the volume a bit overwhelming; but a committed core of subscribers keeps the list flourishing. One group member posts a monthly list of the top fifty posters to the list and for some making that list is a point of pride. Maintaining a family

⁶³ Information online at AC web site; web address has been withheld for confidentiality reasons. Also cited in AC email: Date: Sun, 30 May 1999 00:33:51 -0400, Subject: Re: Annoying, or Upsetting Forwards: Get 'Em Here!!!/*LONG

orientation in its view, group members are referred to as list sibs (short for sibling), referencing one another as “brothers and sisters in Christ”.

The list began around 1988, initially as a handful of people interested in the Episcopal Church. They attempted to create a Catholic and Anglican newsgroup on Usenet but failed to receive approval. Initial participants were recruited from Usenet by one of the founding list members, CS. The list began as a collection of posts and information dealing with the Episcopal Church published periodically, between once a week and a month. After a year in this format list volume grew and there was a desire to have faster turnaround. From this the Episcopal mailing list was born. List traffic steadily increased to the point where the software could not keep up with demand, so it was moved to a new listserve, software American.edu. Because this software had a limit of eight characters for list titles, its name needed to be changed. The name Anglican was selected to reflect the growing worldwide participation in the list.

Another key member, who works with IBM and was involved in early research and networking efforts related to the Internet, helped establish a series of addresses and email lists of which the Anglican List was one. CS recruited her husband early on for technical administration of this list. He now serves as official list owner. A few years ago when the list again had to move to a new server, a number of members contributed financially to the purchase of a new server specifically for the Anglican List. For a time it lived at CS’s house in Georgia, then it moved to her husband’s office to take advantage of a faster connection, where it has been located for the past few years. These individuals are still part of this cyberparish along with other core members who have been part of the list for five years or more. A steady influx of new and changing subscribers can be on the list at any given time as well as members who come and go from the list as their lifestyles dictate.

The researcher joined the list in October 1998, eight months before the formal start of the case study. This provided an opportunity to get a clear picture of the form and types of discussion dominating the list as well as develop a strategy to deal with the volume of email created by the list on a daily basis. The list was discovered in a web search of Catholic and Anglican email lists. As the first two case studies involved online communities with predominately evangelicals with charismatic leanings, it was determined that a case study from an Anglo-Catholic tradition might provide a fuller view of Christendom and the Church in the online context.

When the researcher first “delurked” on the list after obtaining permission from the list owner to study the group, one welcome post clearly described how members see the AC:

Two things strike me about this cyberparish: First, I have made some delightful friends on this list all over the world. I've corresponded privately with about a dozen and have spoken with one on the phone and met several others in one of our local get-togethers. I really love (most) of the folks on the list! Second, it's very difficult to leave the list. I've left twice over frustration (we run cycles where the same threads get hashed out over and over again when new folks come on board...) and once because the volume of mail simply became overwhelming. Since I joined 2-1/2 years ago I've left three times and the longest time away was about three weeks. I've always rejoined because I miss the people, I miss the banter, I miss learning new things and I miss what's happening in the lives of my listmates!

Realise I am no reclusive, shy Anglican who uses his 'puter for socialisation. I have a real job, a family, golf way too much, and serve on the vestry of my parish.⁶⁴

This post highlights two key features of the AC and reasons for selecting it as a case study: the high level of commitment by members to online interaction and face-to-face meetings. A list meet occurs whenever three or more list sibs gather together. These are often described in great detail to the list. The opportunity to participate or organise a list meet is highly valued by the group and encouraged. Their web site houses a “kiosk” which archives photos from various gatherings.

This section has provided an overview of the specific case studies to be investigated in greater depth in chapters five, six and seven. However, an overview of how these online communities will be evaluated still needs to be outlined. The next section will state the research questions, referred to in the introduction of this chapter, serving as tools to identify key findings of each case study.

CONCLUSION: EVALUATION STRATEGY

The research findings of the three case studies are presented under four themes: The Online Community and the Online Context, The Online Community and the Real World, The Online Community as a Community and The Online Community Reflects on the Church. Each case study is analysed using these four areas as a way to interpret the data collected during the three phases of research. Themes correspond with research questions emerging

⁶⁴ Email sent to AC, Date sent: Wed, 26 May 1999 10:25:51 -0500, Subject: Web page and the AC

from the literature review in chapters one through three. The following is a more detailed description of each theme and the questions being asked in relation to it.

Explored first in each case study is how a particular online community is influenced by the online context. This section examines how each community uses Internet technology and adapts to the online environment. How email influences each online community's method and style of communication are evaluated. Unique aspects of social interaction emerging in online communication and the type of individuals drawn to this style of communication are highlighted. Other issues to be considered are language usage, emoticons, embodiment or where the body is located online, dealing with spamming/flamming and anonymity (as these issues have been defined in chapter two). This section addresses the following research question:

How does Internet/email technology and the online environment shape these online Christian communities and the ways they interact?

The second theme deals with how the online community interacts with the real world. This section examines how each community links online experiences with real world activities. The amount of personal disclosure taking place within email posts and what distinction members make between online and offline behaviour is described. Members' attempts to bring online experiences and relationships into their offline lives are highlighted. Also, ways in which members actively go beyond the screen to add depth to their online communities are discussed. This section addresses the following research questions:

What distinctions do members make between their online and real world communities? How do members bring online experience into their daily lives?

How do members interpret these areas of overlap of real world and online community? What picture do they offer of a community connected globally and locally ("g-local")?

The third theme focuses on how online groups are characterised as a community. This section examines how each online group develops unique patterns of behaviour and a common identity. How each email list defines itself as a community, topics around which members gather and elements affecting communal identity or behaviour are considered. This is done through identifying the online communities' narrative, influencing expectations and traits of each community. Also models of the Internet, described in chapter two, and

applying to each online community, are identified here. This section addresses the following research question:

How do members describe and characterise their particular online Christian communities?

The fourth theme considers how each online community reflects on both the local and global Christian Church. This section demonstrates how members offer a critique of the real world Church community in several ways. Often when members identify reasons for becoming involved in a Christian online community, they highlight strengths or characteristics they value in their online community. These characteristics provide an evaluation tool, defining attributes members desire to be part of the real world Church. In some cases members stated their real world church lacked these characteristics, but their online community met these criteria. Others provided a critique of the real world church, not through words or descriptions, but through their behaviour towards their local congregation and examples they provide critiquing their local church. Another issue for consideration in this section is whether the online community becomes a supplement or substitute for real world community for its members.

Each online community is also evaluated according to Dulles' models of the church and how they portray the mission or purpose of the Church, as described in chapter one. In some cases it is shown that church traditions often are simply transported online, in an attempt to maintain these models online as they are lived out in a real world context. In other cases, Dulles' models must be adapted online and these adaptations serve as a mirror to the real world Church, illustrating ways in which the models may be more clearly lived out in the online context. This section will address this research question:

In what ways do online Christian Communities critique the real world Church or challenge traditional models of Church?

This chapter has presented the general methodology for this research project. CMC research has evolved into a multi-disciplinary pursuit. While it often focuses on similar issues of identity and social structure, it typically integrates different methodologies and approaches. One current trend in online community research is to identify and describe specific group narratives through researcher immersion in the online environment. Similarly, this is an ethnographic study, seeking to present a "picture of a people", to describe the unique

features of the online Christian community through observation and direct contact with three distinct people groups. A case study approach is being taken because it allows employment of multiple research techniques, thus enabling collection of “rich” and “thick” data. As described, this strategy has been applied to three email-based online Christian communities selected on the basis of common online practices and diversity of theological traditions represented.

Chapters five, six and seven tell the stories of three email-based Christian communities. Each chapter begins with an overview of the specific case study. Then summaries of the three phases of research are given, focusing on a descriptive explanation of how these phases were carried out. Then each online community is examined using these four themes in relation to the findings of each case study.

CHAPTER 5

CASE STUDY ONE: THE COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present research findings from the Community of Prophecy (CP), an email-based online Christian community. First, the CP functions as an online community is described, followed by an overview of data collected in the three-phase case study. Secondly, the “CP and the Online Context” describes how email and Internet technology influences communication within the CP. Thirdly, the “CP and the Real World” outlines how CP members connect their offline lives and experiences with their online community. Fourthly, the “CP as a Community” considers the unique aspect of this group, which defines itself both as a social network and as a spiritual network. Fifthly, the “CP Reflects upon the Real World Church” presents how the CP provides a critique of the real world Church through its behaviours as well as through comments made by members. Finally, a summary of the research findings and a synopsis of the main points of analysis discovered are presented in this chapter.

OVERVIEW OF THE COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY

The Community of Prophecy focuses on enabling individuals who feel God has given them the gift of prophecy a place to practice and to receive teaching about that gifting. To the CP prophecy is used “in the New Testament sense” referring to revelation received from God in the form of words, impressions, pictures, visions or dreams used to offer encouragement or exhortation to others.¹ This understanding of the gift of prophecy is often emphasised and practised by many Charismatic and Pentecostal churches.

¹ It is recognised that this is one interpretation of the prophetic. Other traditions such as Prophetic Witness also seek to hear God and relay his voice in culture. This is noted in the work of Walter Brueggemann, consult: Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (USA: Fortress Press, 1978) and in the field of communication in the work Clifford Christians, consult: Clifford Christians, Eugene Dykema, Aire Leegwater, Stephen Monsma, Egbert Schuurman and Lambert Van Poolne, ‘Responsible Technology. A Christian Perspective’ (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986) .

Debates on the gift of prophecy and other off-topic issues are not allowed as the community portrays itself as a “school” and a “safe place” to learn. This emphasis is clearly stated in point six of the CP charter:

This list builds community and is a place to support and encourage each other and to build up each other in our gifting. However, this list is not a support group for emotional or mental problems and is not a place to dump problems that are unrelated to the prophetic gifting.²

To maintain this environment as a “safe-place” and keep the list focused the CP has a “leadership-core” made up of pastors and other Christian leaders with recognised prophetic gifting. Their purpose is to guide the online discussion and provide teaching on the gift of prophecy. As the CP Charter states:

They will be giving input, guidance and support to the group and helping us to learn to grow effectively in our prophetic gifting. They will also help steer us away from off-topic tangents.³

The founder-moderator of the CP is a computer professional and minister from California. She leads the CP along with a leadership-core, who serve as advisors, teachers and administrators to the community. The leadership-core is clearly identified in the group and a profile of each individual can be found on the community web site.

The CP offers various forms of member involvement. The main focus is the CP “school” list on which individuals post prophetic words or revelation and elicit feedback from other members. Another function of the main list is to offer prophetic training courses by members of the leadership-core. In these classes a teaching article is posted on the list with a discussion topic each week and members are encouraged to offer related feedback. Everyone subscribed to the CP list receives these lessons and can choose whether or not to read or participate. Classes run concurrently with other general discussions. Examples of past classes include “avoiding prophetic pitfalls”, character issues related to the prophetic and the relationship between the apostolic and the prophetic.

The CP runs several chat rooms taking place within various Internet Relay Chat (IRC) forums, allowing members another level of involvement. These groups meet at a designated

² As noted in CP charter, posted to the CP (Date: Tue, Dec 1997 17:01:03 -0800, Subject: Letter to your Pastor)

³ As noted in CP charter.

time at a pre-determined channel on a weekly basis, typically for a two-hour period. Some are informal drop-in discussions, while others are more structured online prayer meetings. A final opportunity offered to CP members is a monthly Personal Prophecy Session (PPS) in which the leadership-core offer online personal prophecy and feedback. Open only to CP members, these sessions offer one-to-one prayer and counsel from the community leaders via American Online or IRC. Members are required to sign up ahead of time, as there are a limited number of slots per session. All of these forms of CP involvement are governed by clear protocol guidelines, detailed in the list charter that set the standard for acceptable and unacceptable community behaviour. The charter stresses "No discussion will be permitted in this conference that questions the basics of the Christian faith...they are assumed fundamental and agreed upon by all participants". These fundamental beliefs include the Bible as the ultimate authority and belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and his bodily resurrection. Strictly emphasised is the fact that the focus of the list is on prophecy and other topics are beyond the scope of the list and not permitted. Unacceptable behaviour outlined in the charter includes: flaming or personal attacks, openly hostile posts, attacks on any Christian leader or group, off-topic posts related to debate and theologising on Biblical prophecy. The charter stresses:

Participants must be polite and respectful and loving at all times. It is OK to disagree with someone and to express that disagreement, but it must be done in love and in a polite and civilised manner.⁴

Violation of the charter will result in a warning from the leadership-core; repeat violations can result in removal from the list. Explored later in this chapter, issues of behaviour expectations and management surfaced on two significant accounts during the case study.

OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDY

The focus of the case study was a 10-week course run by the CP entitled, "Prophetic Training 101". At that time the CP had been in existence for about two and a half years. This was the first class the leadership-core had offered online. Though not all CP members were actively involved in the course, this training dominated the group's discussion and interaction. In December 1997 the CP moderator was contacted and permission was obtained from her and the CP leadership to participate in the CP Training as a researcher. As stated

⁴ As noted in CP charter.

previously, the CP was the pilot study of this research project. Case study methodology was used in the research design and a three-phase research strategy was employed. A summary of each phase follows.

PHASE 1- PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION RESULTS

The first phase involved participant-observation in the community during the Prophetic Training Course. Starting in January 1998, it involved two components, a training lesson and an “activation exercise”. The training lesson was a weekly Bible-based lesson on the prophetic ministry produced by the CP leadership-core and emailed to the CP each Monday. The activation exercise was a weekly assignment providing CP members with an opportunity to practise ministering “prophetically” to other individuals or groups. The activations put into practice principles and ideas taught in the training lessons either through email partnering, IRC groups or arranging for CP members to meet together in real time. Members received the training sessions through the main email list. Those who did the activations via IRC and email partnering were also subscribed to a separate sub-list providing specific instructions relating to that form of technology and activities.

The ethnographic approach employed by the researcher involved reading and logging all posts made during the 10-week period and keeping a journal of observations about the community and personal interaction with the group. The email partner option in the activation component was selected, providing interaction with a wide range of community members. Over the ten-week period the researcher had personal contact with about 20 individuals through the activations as well with four members of the leadership-core. The email activation subgroup generated a high volume of posts. In weeks one to three, six and nine individuals on this list were assigned by the conference administrator to small groups (two to five persons) and were to communicate privately by email to complete the activation exercise. For the remaining weeks of the email, activation postings were made to the entire sub-list.

The phase one focus was on observing the relationships and communication habits within this community to see whether patterns and relationships developed might influence CP members’ “real life” communities and consequently members’ views of the global “body of Christ”. Participant-observation in the CP allowed for exploration in the areas of questioning mentioned at the beginning of the section, identifying the unique attributes of the online community and connections made between online and real world contexts. This was done

by looking at how CP members described their online community in their posts, how they described other CP members, noting references made to members' "real world" lives and church involvement and how they connect the CP with Christianity and Christendom. These observations were recorded in a diary kept during the ten-week course noting all personal interactions between the researcher and CP members, as well as recording general observations about the community, noting these themes and including extracts from various email posts.

The CP population continued to grow throughout the ten weeks of the case study as many new members joined to become part of the training. By the end of the second week CP membership was estimated at 525 individuals with 172 registered in email and IRC activation formats.⁵ Over the ten-week case study the CP generated 687+ email messages. The separate email activation sub-group the researcher was subscribed to generated an additional 706 messages from weeks four to ten. The researcher's personal correspondence totalled 104 emails, with the total body of data amounting to nearly 1500 email messages.

PHASE 2- QUESTIONNAIRE/SURVEY RESULTS

The second phase involved administering a questionnaire to the CP community. At the conclusion of the 10-week training a general posting was made asking for volunteers to fill out an email questionnaire. The purpose was to explore in greater depth the questions "What needs is the Christian community online meeting that are lacking in people's real world community?"; "Is there any connection between the online and real world community?"; and "How do people link the two together?"

While the Prophetic Training was still in progress the leadership-core were contacted and permission to post a request for volunteers to fill out an email questionnaire was obtained. This post appeared on the list the week after the training course had ended. From this post 38 volunteers came forward and copies of the questionnaire were sent directly to them. Of these volunteers 27 completed the questionnaire. In addition, personal requests were sent out with copies of the questionnaire to email partners from the activation activities and other personal contacts. Of these eleven individuals, three returned completed questionnaires. Data response, collection and tabulation took place over a seven-week period from the beginning

⁵ Email sent to CP, Date sent: Wed, 21 Jan 1998 14:24:32 -0800 (PST), Subject: Status and general info on Training 101

of April till mid-May 1998. The total sample was 30 responses, quite small for the total number of individuals represented in the community, but a high response (a 73% return rate) from the number of individuals actually contacted.

Respondents were fairly equally represented between females (17) and males (13), the average age being 44 years old. Most individuals were married (26 of the 30) with three being the average number of people in a household. Representing a variety of professions, the top three job categories were Pastors (6), Computer Professionals (5) and Homemakers-Teachers (four each). Twenty-one respondents came from the USA, with others living in the UK (4), Canada (2), Philippines (2) and Norway (1). Eighteen respondents indicated they attended a Charismatic/Pentecostal type church, though no one denomination or affiliate organisation held a significant representation, (8 were described as non-denominational Charismatic fellowships).

Fourteen respondents had been members of the CP at least 6 months prior to the start of the Prophetic Training course and eleven had joined the community during the first part of 1998 just to be able to participate in the training. Almost all (28) respondents had been actively involved in the training course and most participated in the email activation option (3 were involved in IRC, 5 in real world groups and 2 in both IRC & RW groups). Their overall response to the course was extremely positive indicating it was a time of personal growth and learning more about prophetic gifting.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The "Background Information" section asked questions concerning demographics (sex, age, marital status, profession, etc.) and technology usage (number of hours spent on email/Internet, where they got access to email/Internet, etc). The "Questions Relating to the Community of Prophecy" contained seven questions on involvement in the community, the training and connections individuals made between this community and their local church. The final section "Questions relating to Email & Internet Usage" collected information about involvement in other online communities and the influence respondents saw it having on their life. A copy of the questionnaire is available in Appendix A.

PHASE 3- INTERVIEW RESULTS

The final phase involved conducting in-depth face-to-face interviews with selected members of the CP.⁶ Three members were chosen from the questionnaire respondents, two from the USA and one from southern England. Interviews were conducted in June and July of 1998 in members' homes and included observation of computer habits, conversation about issues of faith, and interaction with other family members or friends. Two interviews also involved visiting the members' home churches. Immersion in the lives of the given members was done in order to verify whether research observations and assumptions concerning the real world impact of these communities were correct and valid.

In addition to the interviews, the researcher attended an informal gathering in spring 1999 of CP members from the UK. The CP moderator and a former leadership-core member had an eight-hour layover enroute to a scheduled ministry trip in South Africa. They arranged to rent a room at a Christian conference centre near Heathrow airport and invited CP members to join them for a time of fellowship and prayer during their brief visit to the UK. Twenty people met on the 31st of March, 17 were CP members, including the two CP leaders from the USA and myself, and three individuals were friends of CP members. The bulk of the meeting focused on a time of ministry where two members of the leadership-core spent 3 hours ministering prophetically to each person there. This was preceded by a time of fellowship and formal introduction where the history of the CP was shared with the group.

The purpose of the third phase of research was to explore in depth the third set of questions stated at the beginning of the pilot study: "Is involvement online changing the way they interact with or in their local church? How do real world and online networks overlap and how does this contribute to describing and/or building community "g-locally"?"⁷ Selection of interviewees was made from their questionnaire responses, comments indicating a willingness to be involved in a face-to-face meeting and their geographic accessibility. Interviews varied in length from two to five hours. In two instances interviews were conducted in different parts over two days. Brief synopses of each interview follow.

⁶ Interview questions can be found in Appendix D; interviewees in each case study were asked the same initial ten questions. Additional personalised questions were also asked to each interviewee relating to online post made during the case study period and individual questionnaire responses. All respondents in this thesis are cited with alias names.

⁷ This word was coined by Barry Wellman meaning to have global network of contact through the global connection of the Internet and was referred to in chapter one.

CHARLOTTE ERASMUSON

"Email lengthens relationships; it's a connection without the boundary of miles allowing individuals to know each other and form a heart-level connection."

The first interview was conducted with Charlotte Erasmuson (CE), a 47 year old housewife who lives in the suburb area of Wheaton, Illinois (USA) near Chicago. She became part of the CP about a year before the training class began when a friend forwarded her a prophecy from the CP community administrator. She contacted the administrator to find out where the post originated and then signed up for the group. Claiming to live in a "geek home", CE was introduced to the Internet through her son at a time when she was experiencing severe environmental allergies which prevented her from reading magazines and newspapers due to reactions to the ink and paper. Forced to stay indoors most of the time, her son would call up various magazines online for her to read. She also began to involve herself in online groups to "talk" to other people, thus opening up a new social dimension for her.

Due to other commitments CE was unable to be part of the CP training during the case study. Yet since then she has become a frequent poster and has even been involved in helping lead other courses and teaching groups on the CP. "I see myself as a conductor or channel, collecting and passing on knowledge."⁸ She says this fits her spiritual gifting in the "ministry of helps" and encouragement. She also feels her involvement online gives her a more complete picture for prayer and intercession, not just her family or church, "but the whole body". When a need or issue is shared online and the community unites together in prayer, she says, "you feel like you are all in the same room".

CE spends an average of seven hours a week in communication on email and says she has a "handful" of "intimate" Internet friendships, calling them a "connection of the heart". A key factor influencing her views of online community comes from her experience in the 1970s living in a Christian community in the Chicago area, involving communal living and a common purpose. For her, a community is people who share their hearts, a vision and purpose. "They have that same focus and I think that's the same anywhere, whether it's on the Internet or in your church or group of Christians that may not even be going to the same church but are connected in that way in the Lord". CE's participation in online community has made the "body of Christ" a tangible reality for her.

⁸ Personal Interview with Charlotte Erasmuson, Wheaton, Illinois (USA), 6 June 1998

LOUISE FOOT

"I've had communication online where I've really felt 'hugged' when I really need it."

Louise Foot (LF) is a single 42-year-old lawyer from Harrisville, Michigan in the USA. She has been living there for five years after leaving a job as a state prosecutor to open her own practice in this small resort community. LF first got online while working at the Michigan State Office of Public Advocacy. Now that she lives in a rural area, she finds Internet access indispensable in her work. It allows her access to law journals she is unable to afford as a single practice lawyer, and to libraries, which would take her several hours by car to reach. Email also enables her to stay in touch with friends and family scattered all across the USA. She spends up to four or five hours a day online.

The Internet has also become for her an important tool to meet people. She values the freedom email allows to be honest and since she doesn't like small talk, online community allows her to "jump in and go deep" quickly. Yet she does not see it as ideal communication and sometimes gets frustrated waiting for a response, especially in a chat room, or by the overwhelming number of posts which can be generated on an active email list.

Her church fellowship meets in a small storefront building and has about 35 regular attendees. Only two others in her fellowship have Internet access and she is the only one involved in an online community. LF plays the keyboard and leads worship each week. She uses the Internet as a resource for finding new praise music or words of prophecy to share during worship times. "I've slowly tried to teach people to be worshippers, and not just sing songs." She also brings information from the Internet to prayer meetings to "help bring some perspective to the Church" of how what is happening in their small group relates to what is "being stirred up all over the world".⁹

Though she says her church seems interested in the information shared, she often feels others do not readily embrace her "world wide perspective". The Sunday worship service is the focus of the fellowship, with Bible studies and prayer meetings being infrequent. She described this past year as a "time of crushing" as the group experienced problems and relational tensions. Involvement in the CP served as a "lifeline", as online interaction provided fellowship and encouragement lacking in her local fellowship.

PATRICK GORING

“The CP is living proof that God can and will use the web for spiritual development.”

Patrick Goring (PG) is a 51 year old Accountant at the University of Exeter living in Sidmouth, England. He first gained access to the Internet in 1993 when Exeter University was wired to the Internet. Initially, because the technology was quite new and there was no work-related content online, it became a social medium for him. PG contacted the network administrator to find out what Internet access could offer. Through this he learned of several Christian discussion groups, which he then joined. On one of these groups he found out about a list called New Wine. He soon became a regular contributor and eventually part of the list leadership advisory team. PG learned about the CP on New Wine, when CP was still at its inception stage. He joined at the very beginning because of his interest in learning more about the gift of prophecy.

PG’s enthusiasm for the Internet is not shared by many of his real world associates. He said his wife is quite ambivalent about his involvement. During our discussions she looked at us blankly as we talked about online interactions, often excusing herself to the kitchen. “Your being here this weekend has been a good thing. It brings some reality to the online for us, especially my wife,” commented PG as he drove me to the train station. “She can see that it’s not just exchanging information, it’s about fellowship and sharing ourselves with one another.” He feels the idea of the “virtual” community is misleading, suggesting there is something false about it, rather than seeing it “as a community of people in real relationships”.¹⁰ PG keeps his email use limited to work, except on the weekends or holidays, going in to work early or spending his lunch hour online so as not to take away from his family. This obviously limits the posts he can respond to as he finds his interaction online must be “intentional” and purposeful.

PG attributes much of his spiritual growth in the last few years to involvement in various online communities and relationships. He said he finds few people to fellowship with in the “gifts of the Holy Spirit”. Due to this frustration he and his wife have stopped attending their local Anglican Church of which until about a year ago they had been an active part. During the interview he visited another local church with which he has involvement as General Secretary of the local YMCA. He appeared to have many Christian contacts in his

⁹ Personal Interview with Louise Foot, Harrisville, Michigan (USA) 18 June 1998

¹⁰ Personal Interview with Patrick Goring, Sidmouth, Devon (UK), 24-25 July 1998

community, but at the time of the interview he was “church-less”, saying the Internet partially met his needs for Christian fellowship.

SUMMARY

In the first part of this chapter, the CP has been presented as an instructional community, a place where people gather to learn from each other on the topic of prophecy, and various opportunities for interaction within the community have been described. Also the triangulation method of the three-phase case study has been described showing how the data have been collected and analysed. While it is true the CP gathers around a specific topic, their reason for being is more than informational exchange. Indeed, one of the outcomes of this research is support for the claim that individuals gather online because of the relationships they create and the support they receive from their online communities. In the next half of the chapter the CP will be analysed under the four thematic areas introduced at the end of chapter four. These are how the CP relates to the online context, to relationships in real world community, how it can be seen as a community in its own right and how it provides a reflection of the real world Church.

THE COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY AND THE ONLINE CONTEXT

In this section how the CP adapts to the online context is examined, focusing on how email influences communication patterns and behaviours. In the CP email is described as offering an honest form of communication facilitating genuine relationships. How Internet technology¹¹, specifically email, effects community communication styles long with how it influences online community behaviour both positively and negatively is explored.

THE APPEAL OF EMAIL

The nature of email communication influences and even encourages certain types of responses. In general, email encourages concise and frequent communication. About half the CP questionnaire respondents (16 out of 30) felt they “talk or communicate with people differently online compared with real life”. Several responded this was because email is “briefer, more direct” (JFG) in its style. Email interaction encourages short, immediate responses, which can lead to heated reactions, arguments or off-the-cuff comments that can

¹¹ It is important to note that for some CP members having email does not mean they necessarily have access to the WWW. For several, this is due to choice and for others it is due to limited ISP access in their local area.

be misunderstood. However, many appreciate email as it can allow respondents time to reflect, enabling some to offer more carefully constructed responses. PG in his interview commented,

The big advantage I find is that you can take time out to think and without being required to give a reaction to something. So if somebody asks you a pointed question ...it gives you time to count to ten without having to respond. I find that very useful.¹²

In his experience people “tend to go overboard to smooth things over” in an online community when arguments occur or things are taken out of context. Email seems to be preferred by certain types or personalities of people, especially those who describe themselves as introverted. Several CP questionnaire respondents noted they preferred online interaction to face-to-face conversations, finding it easier to express themselves in writing. They also felt email encourages more open and honest conversation. One member posted the following comment on the main list just after the CP case study:

In this ‘congregation’ we can’t hide much. We don’t stay isolated in our bubbles with our own burdens and struggles. We get stripped of our masks (they don’t work well by email). Although we are from all over the world, all different from each other, our distinctiveness from each other has lost its separateness...Can anything else live this out more than an email “congregation” where we know nothing about each other than the common bond of Christ--the bond of LOVE?

(Date sent: Tue, 24 Mar 1998 19:10:11, Subject: school feedback)

Email, they claim, causes people to be “stripped of our masks” thus hinting this technology offers genuine community. They also assert the nature of the online community dislodges members from self-absorption as email prevents people from becoming “isolated in our bubbles”. This suggests that members view the CP as a tangible manifestation of the concept of the universal Christian community. By enabling members to interact with “brothers and sisters” from all over the world, the CP influenced how many understood what it is to be part of the “body of Christ”. As one respondent from the Philippines said,

Like in the ‘real world’ community, I meet various kinds of people in the online community so I can relate better to some than others. For me the exciting feature of the ‘online community’ is that it is international in scope so it brings greater immediacy to the ‘abstract’ doctrine of the universal Body of Christ. (CC)¹³

¹² Personal Interview with Patrick Goring, Sidmouth, Devon (UK), 24-25 July 1998.

¹³ CP Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Thu, 9 Apr 1998 21:23:06 +0800, Subject: Re: Hello

Members who lack physical, geographic proximity to other Christians especially value online fellowship. Many depended on email, saying otherwise their contact with like minded believers would be severely limited. Several, such as a mother from the western USA, commented on this: "Living in a rural area, as well as being a housewife, tends to make me feel isolated some times. I love the fact that I can log on and share with people I would never have had the opportunity of meeting otherwise". (RK) While many CP members emphasised the positive attributes of online communication, several limitations and weaknesses of email were also noted.

USING EMAIL TO VISUALISE THE NON-VISUAL

Online community is a community of the disembodied. Email communication is mediated so individuals interact indirectly with others, through exchanged texts without voices or faces. By interacting with what was called the "word-body construct" in chapter two, people become characterised as text. Individuals read posts not only to find meaning in the text, but also to get a sense of the type of people they are interacting with. The lack of non-verbal and visual cues can distance and de-personalise communication as individuals conceive of themselves as interacting with blocks of text rather than the actual producers of the text.

Those who desire connection with the community and others online often try to transcend these limitations by adding visual elements to their texts. In the CP some members began their posts with attempts to "visualise" the group as part of their activation exercises. Individuals described how they imagined the community as "Everyone was sitting at their computers, hands poised over the keyboard, alert and attentive, listening to the Lord".¹⁴ Others provide an image of their personal interactions with the computer in doing the exercises: "And so I am doing my usual thing, staring at the empty screen and waiting on the Lord..."¹⁵

Frequently members tried to deepen their communication through use of emoticons, textual cues used to qualify texts and add a visual element to a non-visual medium. Emoticons add emotional content and definition to various texts. Commonly used emoticons were the :) smiling face and the :(frowning, unhappy face. Symbolism can also be used to more fully

¹⁴ Email sent to CP, Date sent: Tue, 10 Feb 1998 22:54:09, Subject: [email-activation] week 5 - Mighty Men of Valour

¹⁵ Email sent to CP, Date: Thursday, February 12, 1998 6:07 PM, Subject: [email-activation] 5th Week!

express ideas and link individuals to certain beliefs/values, such as the image of the cross which appears as part of one individual's signature tag.



Some also serve as community identity markers, with some being community specific. A symbol frequently used in Christian "renewal" of Charismatic email circles represents a person with hands uplifted in praise and worship to God. \o/ One CP member described this in a post as a "charismatic head and shoulders shot". An electronic way to symbolise an individual as a Christian is the Greek Ichthus fish, <> or ><. Another symbol commonly used to indicate someone who is "in the river of God" or a part of the current charismatic renewal is ~\o/~. Each one marks a certain belief held by the individual and shared by the rest of the community.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF DISEMBODIED COMMUNICATION

While email technology offers quick and easy communication it can also facilitate undesirable behaviours. Anonymity online can lower people's inhibitions, making it less of a risk to violate social and cultural standards. Therefore, each online community must establish its own protocol and choose how it will regulate behaviour. In a real world community an individual's action within a group can be hidden or sidelined. In an email based community everyone has access to behaviour violations posted to the group, whether or not members want to know about it. Two scenarios arose during the CP case study where the community had to deal with unacceptable behaviour.

In week two, a spammer made his way onto the community list. The definition of a spammer, which came out of the leadership post on this incident, is someone who ignores the list charter and sends a message outside the stated boundaries. The leadership took a hard line approach in this incident, commenting on the spammer's character as a Christian and telling the group to "have nothing to do with him". While the researcher did not receive the spammer's post, she did see the spamming alert posted by the community's administrator.

*If *** was really a Christian who desired to behave in a Christ-like manner, he would NOT sneak around in off-hours subscribing to lists (after having been warned about and unsubscribed from these lists less than 24 hours prior for the same*

inappropriate behaviour) and then ignoring the list's charter, spam them with his own agenda

(Date sent: Sat, 24 Jan 1998 07:18:29 -0800 (PST), Subject: Spammer Alert)

A second incident happened in week four and involved the community dealing with an individual in the email activation group who violated two counts of the community's charter through flaming. She did this by giving a "judgmental" prophetic word; publicly correcting another individual's prophetic word and then attacking another individual's character. When a member of the leadership-core contacted this person privately to discuss her behaviour she responded by posting a hostile email to the email activation group and then to the whole community. Shortly after this the individual unsubscribed from the list and the leadership-core made a general post to the whole community giving a synopsis of the situation.

**** has provided a living object lesson of how character issues can interfere with the prophetic. She did some inappropriate things on the list...*

Please be assured that when there are problems, leadership does address them right away. We try to do this quietly and behind the scenes, so those folks will not be unnecessarily embarrassed. But they are addressed.

...has provided an example of what a wrong and unteachable spirit looks like; and given us an example of why we should avoid trying to minister from this type of spirit. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is using this experience as an object lesson to underscore the importance of godly character when moving in the prophetic.

(Date sent: Thu, 5 Feb 1998 13:06:15 -0800 (PST), Subject: A living object lesson)

The leadership provided the community with information about the situation and how the leadership-core deals with "unacceptable" behaviour. The incident was used to set distinct boundaries concerning online conduct and expectations of how CP members should interact with one another through email.

Email shapes the methods and behaviour of communication within the online setting. This can have positive results, giving introverts or those who feel more at ease with written communication a platform from which to excel and add input. It can also pose challenges, as members have to find ways to move beyond disembodied communication to add social cues and personalise their communication. It can also create negative affects, such as allowing for spamming and flaming. The online context not only effects the patterns of communication, but also how individuals conceive of the community.

THE COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY AND THE REAL WORLD

Under the theme of the CP and its relationship to the “real world” this section examines how members of an online community bring together various aspects of their online and offline lives. Distinction between online and offline life is made to differentiate the two spheres in; one involves connections through technology, and the other connection through physical contact. Many CP members would not agree with separating these two spheres; many see them as interconnected especially in relation to the language they use.

BRINGING TOGETHER ONLINE AND OFFLINE EXPERIENCES

Many members consciously try to connect online and offline experiences and lives. This includes sharing information from the CP with their local church and friends or sharing information about their local church with the CP. Sometimes CP members become online advocates and prophetic ambassadors in making this connection. Involvement in the CP provides accessibility to information and tools not available in many local churches. This equips members to inform the local church about happenings and ideas circulating in the wider Christian Charismatic/Renewal community. As one CP member who is active in prayer ministry with her church in the USA commented on her questionnaire response,

It has definitely impacted the intercessors in my congregation because I bring what I have learned to them- also to others in the body who move in prophecy- I am a walking pool of information and most of it I got over E-Mail! Things the Lord is telling them I can confirm that others around the world have heard the same thing from the Lord in a given time. (LM)¹⁶

Several questionnaire respondents also commented about how they had used activities from the CP in their local churches. As a missionary in the Philippines said, “I’ve already tried an exercise from the CP with some Bible College students”. (JD)

In their email posts CP members frequently reported details of experiences in their offline church. On Monday morning it was common to read reports from members about how the Lord spoke to them during church services they’d attended over the weekend. They often commented how what they observed or heard offline validated what was shared by others online. One example was noted in week nine in an email post where an individual responded to those who had given input to a dream she had shared. She commented how God showed

¹⁶ CP Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Thu, 9 Apr 1998 21:23:06 +0800, Subject: none

her a deeper revelation of what was discussed online through an experience at a prophetic conference she and others in her RW activation group attended.

Thank you so very much all of you for your sharings regarding Jesus on a Horse because they have added so much vision and understanding to what I thought I heard the Lord say Tues. night, on the last night of a Prophetic Conference that our (CP) Activation Group had gone to...

(Date sent: Tue, 10 Mar 1998 11:00:50 EST, Subject: Jesus on a Horse)

These two examples illustrate how CP members take aspects of their online community into their real world activities and integrate their offline experience in their online correspondence.

ONLINE PARTICIPATION AS PART OF DAILY LIFE

Many CP members articulated high levels of commitment and investment in the CP, influencing how they integrated their online participation into their daily routines. Several members shared in emails the efforts they made to include their online involvement in everyday life. In week seven of the case study one couple emphasised the accountability and commitment they felt towards the CP. This has caused them to develop a system of printing emails they read to each other each day in their work travels.

I print off about 90% so that we can read and pray over things together in the unity we have in each other - I know we have printed out over two reams {{1000}} sheets in just the last several months.

In the car, I drive, and she reads and we both praise the Lord for prayer needs and the glorious words each of you are sending to the list. Each day, we have made an effort to thank and bless as many of you as we can, but we find there are not enough hours in the day or night.

(Date sent: Fri, 27 Feb 1998 15:57:42 EST, Subject: [email-activation]
WOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)

This example shows how seriously members take their involvement in the CP. It is not simply something to do in one's spare time. Many integrate it into the fabric of their lifestyles. During the same week another member expressed this commitment by describing the process she went through to receive and complete the week's activation while being away on holiday with limited email access.

Hi there folks... I know that this is very late, but when I tell you the reason, you'll be glad for me.... I was on a trip for a week and a

half, to do street evangelization at Mardi Gras in New Orleans, then to Brownsville in Pensacola to get filled up again...so I had the lesson sent to a friend in Pensacola, and did the studying and prep for the activation in the parking lot at Brownsville, in our old church bus! got home at midnight last night, and the first thing I want to do is get this posted...

(Date sent: Sun, 01 Mar 1998 15:18:14 -0500, Subject: [email-activation] week 7 activation)

It is clear many CP members attempt to integrate their online and offline involvement. They build bridges between the two through the language they employ, the behaviours they adopt and how they conceptualise their on and offline communities.

ONLINE PARTICIPATION INFLUENCES REAL WORLD CHURCH INVOLVEMENT

Interaction online can also shape how members relate to the offline Christian community. Members gave examples of how participation in the CP had influenced their attitude and behaviour in their local church. In the questionnaire the majority of respondents (22 of 30) said CP involvement had affected their relationship to the local church in a positive way. Several expressed that it had influenced the ways they “minister” by giving them more confidence and boldness to function in the gift of prophecy or prayer. One member who attends a Pentecostal church in the USA said he had been “spiritually uplifted” through the CP which now affects how he prays for others.

This is the first time that I have studied/experienced this level of persistent contact with other Christians in a common project...I am in a prayer team after services. I find that since I've begun to see how God moves prophetically - sometimes in prayer am “carried along by the spirit” and have a word or two for those I am praying with. (RS)¹⁷

Others claim involvement in the CP has caused them not only to minister differently, but also to interact with other church members more positively. The CP allowed them to see prophecy as a “body ministry” and not just for a select few. One respondent said it “has caused me to encourage others in the church to be aware of the gifts they have”. (CB)

Online and offline experiences and information become interconnected for many CP members, sometimes consciously and other times unconsciously. How members link their

¹⁷ CP Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Wed, 01 Apr 1998 21:42:15 EST, Subject: Re: E-mail Questionnaire

online and offline involvement demonstrates how online Christian community can extend the sphere of one's Christian fellowship or ministry as the two areas become indistinguishable.

COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY AS A COMMUNITY

This section explores how the CP describes itself as a community, considering how it characterises itself as a distinct community. Two identifications emerge through this analysis: the CP as a "social network" linked to the model described in chapter two and a "spiritual network" relating to the community's narrative.

THE COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY AS A SOCIAL NETWORK

The Internet as Social Network emphasised the Internet's ability to facilitate the formation of social webs online. This model highlights the Internet as a communal network where members emotionally invest in an online community. Describing the CP as Social Network highlights factors which influence and cement relationships within the community.

CP members often described the email list as an "online congregation" in order to aid their communicating and connecting with the group. Members frequently referred to the group as "brothers and sisters". Others addressed the group as "The Prophetic Family", "Good People" or "Precious Saints". Individuals also used metaphors such as an "army" or "team" in their emails referring to the community. These not only expressed how individuals conceptualised the community; they described perceptions of the CP's role or purpose.

Throughout the case study members expressed strong feelings of unity and belonging in their posts concerning the community. Over the ten weeks increasing numbers of individuals shared openly about their real world lives and how this related to the community. Replies to lessons or activations often included personal details by members. Many posts during the course shared not only personal reactions, but also referred to emotional and even physical responses.

I too had a real sense that the group took on a unity this week, which was not there at the same level in previous weeks. It is feeling really safe and comfortable, in the right sense of the word. I am soooo excited to think what the Lord will do this week!

(Date sent: Wed, 11 Feb 1998 06:03:57+000, Subject: Re: Week 4)

Activation exercises facilitating person-to-person interaction encouraged a greater sense of investment and camaraderie in the community. Some members directed posts to the entire community instead of a single individual. Others addressed specific individuals in community posts. Discussions typically private in a face-to-face community were made public. This allowed the entire community to observe how individuals interacted with each other, enabling members to become acquainted with others without directly communicating with them.

The public nature of online communication helped members move individual discussions into the corporate sphere. As members grew more comfortable with CP, some began to root their personal identity online with the community's identity. This process is described in the following email:

Hi there! ...I have been lurking on the list for months...I am a fairly new Christian...and am attending a non denominational church, moving in the prophetic and God has used me in this prophetic way from time to time...I am so happy that He has chosen to guide me to this place to learn more about His gifts and how to properly care for them!!!

(Date sent: Fri, 23 Jan 1998 06:37:11, Subject: Course 101 Week 2)

The CP leadership promoted the idea of social networking by emphasising it was a “safe-place” and encouraged members to share personal details with the community. This was demonstrated through the leadership-core’s monitoring of discussions and enforcing issues of protocol. Encouraging an atmosphere focused on intimacy aided CP members to develop high levels of emotional investment in the community. Individuals often displayed a willingness to be vulnerable in their emails. One illustration developed during week four and involved a community member who described himself as depressed. Initially, he responded to a post about “discouragement” and proclaimed “one more ounce of pressure, and I’m gone. Seriously”.¹⁸

Over the next few days several posts personally directed to him were made by members of the group seeking to encourage and validate him and one earnest plea was made for him not to go but to stay with the group. At the end of the week he responded by thanking the group for blessing him with public and private support messages. He also shared his perception of

¹⁸ Email sent to CP, Date sent: Tue, 3 Feb 1998 23:49:24 +1100, Subject: Re: [email-activation] Discouragement...

Satan attacking his computer modem to keep him offline, but he was back, and thanks to the group he was going to hang on.

The CP creates a forum for members to respond easily in supportive ways to each other and public posts allow encouragement to be given and received quickly. When a member is validated publicly it highlights the positive supportive atmosphere within the community. Support of this nature may not always be this visible in a local church environment; hence an online environment can seem to be more caring and supportive. The social and supportive connections facilitated within the CP helped sustain the social bond of the group, encouraging members to invest themselves in the community.

THE COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY AS A SPIRITUAL NETWORK

Relationships within the CP are not only characterised as social, for many they are described as spiritual. This is partially due to the community's focus on the gift of prophecy. Members are taught to seek prophetic revelation from God, by transitioning from functioning with their "natural" minds to a state of connecting with God in the realm of the "Spirit". In the CP there is a correlation between the spiritual world and the online context, both being invisible realms. It appears cyberspace, as unseen virtual space, may be conducive for this type of community to function in, as it creates an "other-worldly" dimension.

The CP's focus is to train and equip members in the prophetic realm. Individuals must in one sense leave the natural world in order to search out revelation only available in spiritual territory. Transition between the natural-spiritual-online worlds becomes an easy, almost natural progression, as the "prophet" must block out all external stimuli and thought in order to focus and "hear what the Spirit is saying". The lack of non-verbal cues and visual stimuli within Internet communication can be advantageous in this process.

A "prophecy" shared and proved accurate online receives a unique credibility over one shared face-to-face. Within the CP, as the "prophet" typically only knows the name and possibly the age or marital status of the individual they are addressing, information must come from the Spirit rather than skills of deduction. Many feel the Internet is a helpful medium for "prophetic prayer", especially when "it is from someone who doesn't know you well and has not even met you and it is a right on prayer...you know it is from the heart of the Father". (LF) The activation component of the CP training facilitated many such

interactions. Therefore the CP aids function in the gift of prophecy by its very location on the Internet.

The CP's narrative can be described as a spiritual network. The term "spiritual networking" came from a face-to-face meeting with a couple from the CP leadership core during week six of the case study. During the conversation they described a spiritual networking emerging in forums such as the CP, explaining it as "God is weaving connection and creating relationships between people all over the world" for prayer and support. They felt connections within the CP would lead to opportunities for members to become involved in others' "real world" lives and ministries. They stressed connections were designed and initiated by God and were internationally diverse, forming an overlapping network of online and offline communities. From their perspective spiritual networking was not limited to the Internet and it was most evident in the Christian "renewal" community.

At its simplest spiritual networking is "networking with spiritual friends". On a larger scale it can be seen as "webs of connection brought together by a spiritual or divine source". The understanding of the CP as a Spiritual Networking was illustrated in two email discussion topics during the case study. They are being referred to as the Pioneer/Manifest Destiny thread and the Warfare/Battle Plan thread. These do not represent a distinct discussion thread; rather, they encompass a series of emails on connected topics under different subject titles.

The Pioneer thread was first expressed in a post made during week two where a member described seeing a picture of a ship crossing the ocean. This was interpreted as a metaphor relating to the "spirit" of the early American pioneers who came via boats to America to colonise the "new" land. The email emphasised obstacles the pioneers encountered and had to overcome. A "pioneer" was established as a positive image to emulate. The process of taming new territory was interpreted not only as a privilege, but a prophetic calling. The writer links the struggles of the pioneers to potential problems that may be encountered by this online community.

At this time however, we must remain extra-vigilant and cover each other in prayer, if we are to come to the other side of the 'ocean', and into God's blessings...

I will tell you this - the devil IS AFRAID, (of the group) as they are now, but especially of what they can become... I see a time when there will be members of the

schools in every country of the world, and that together we will become an incredible, united fighting machine for the kingdom of God.

(Date sent: Sat, 24 Jan 1998 04:46:11 EST, Subject: Pioneer spirit...)

Characterising the group as being on a divine mission with predications of the community's potential, provided the CP with a way to move beyond the bounds of the online setting to predict its influence in the offline world.

The Warfare thread followed the Pioneer thread, building on the image of divine destiny being lived out. The image of warfare or conflict established the fact that the group faced an enemy who sought to prevent exploration and expansion of the community. These attacks took the form of computer technical problems and situations in the community leading to "confusion, intimidation, discouragement". A battle plan was given to the group; members needed to pray for the community and its leadership.

In week six the CP experienced major technical difficulties when the community's administrator server crashed, erasing the CP web site and the archive of community emails. These incidents were interpreted as a "spiritual attack" on the community. Members reacted with a spiritual call-to-arms, to pray for the community and its technical problems. As one member wrote:

On Monday we saw the message of the WWW problem & started praying and Monday night late my computer started giving error messages & just bombed out for no reason. I think the devil is trying every trick he knows. Ha! Well he's lost the battle when Jesus had risen! Praise God! The gates of hell will not prevail as the saints of God march on! We also pray for a total restoration of all the work on the web site.

(Date sent: Wed, 18 Feb 1998 14:11:30, Subject: WWW pages gone)

Outlining the conflict and identifying the enemy helped highlight the strategic role of the CP and its perceived struggle against external spiritual forces. Acceptance of these ideas enabled community members to see themselves as part of a group with spiritual significance not only online, but in the real world Christian community.

Seeing the CP as a spiritual network was used to explain how members should react to conflict experienced individually and communally. One member, overwhelmed by stress and the amount of email, publicly spoke of wanting to withdraw from the community during week six. However, these personal feelings were re-interpreted as she saw the circumstances

as having been planted by Satan to get her away from the community. Spiritual networking was also used to explain how relationships were formed and sustained in the CP. God instigates connections online and offline, which are as strategic. As one member wrote:

The Lord has created friendship and bonds and He will use these bonds in times ahead. Value the bonds that have been created, for the Lord will form intercessory teams that will strengthen places that are weak. Expand your horizons says the Lord, ... I am raising up teams, teams of "nobodies" ...nobodies as far as title goes, but of great value and worth to Me, says the Lord...

(Date sent: Tue, 10 Feb 1998 15:49:44 +0930, Subject:[email-activation] wk 5 activation)

This idea of "teams" being raised up became more than just words when, in the final week of the CP training, the administrator announced a new ministry had been formed by several CP members. This seemed to fulfil prophecies that ministries would be born out of the CP. Not only did they offer logistic and factual data about this new online and offline prophetic ministry; they also gave examples of how God had given his "signature" of approval on this venture. Testimonies of how needs had been met, such as the provision of unsolicited funds to pay the federal registration expenses for non-profit status and a well received prophetic seminar taught by one of the board members, were posted.

The CP is a community with a unique story. Spiritual networking demonstrated how a narrative could bring cohesion and identity to a community. It also showed that as members identify with a narrative they find purpose or sense of worth, shaping their conception of the group and their role in it. Spiritual networking allows community members to see themselves as part of something that reaches beyond the screen with the potential to influence the global Christian community through online spiritual connections.

COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY'S REFLECTION ON THE CHURCH

This section explores how the CP reflects on the real world Church. This theme uncovers characteristics members appreciate most about this online Christian community and how they compare to members' local fellowships and general experience of Christian community. By highlighting members' comments and behaviour a critique of the real world Church emerges. First, areas CP members identify as strengths of the CP are noted, which they see as lacking in their real world church experience. Secondly, this is highlighted through the

experience of one member. Thirdly, how the CP relates to Dulles' model of the Church as Mystical Communion is addressed.

STRENGTHS OF ONLINE COMMUNITY

CP members noted the online context often facilitated communication more easily than their real world church structures. Most questionnaire respondents said they cared for their online community in the same way they cared for members in their face-to-face communities (22 of 30). Comments were similar to this one made by one American member: "even though many of us have never met face-to-face, I sense each of us cares for one another. Perhaps living so far away from one another is also 'liberating'". (DH-P) Respondents also felt they could have the same degree of honesty and trust (22 of 30) due to the absence of social cues and the ability to be anonymous. This, they felt, freed people to be more honest online. One individual compared his online experience to telephone counselling saying "the online medium makes it easier to be open and honest, because any negative body language is done away with". (RS) This allows people to share things in email they would have difficulty expressing face-to-face.

Comparing intimacy in relationships online to those in the local church drew mixed responses. Often referring to a lack of fellowship available in their local church, eleven individuals indicated their online relationships were more intimate. Nine individuals identified their online relationships as less intimate citing the time it takes to exchange emails, and limitations of online expression. Many stressed they felt more intimacy online and highlighted that support and open communication were lacking in their real world churches. "I have been dealing with very deep issues in my life this past year and have found that people in my local church (which is small and a recent plant out) don't really understand. I have joined specific lists on the net and found these a lifeline!" said one member from the UK. (GL)

Freedom to share opinion or function in spiritual gifts, along with receiving encouragement and support, were highlighted as key traits members appreciated about the CP. Many spoke openly about frustration related to being in churches that were not open and receptive to "gifts of the spirit". This was illustrated by Patrick Goring's interview, in which he stated he had recently stopped attending the local Anglican Church he had been committed to for many years because it "neither accepts nor moves in the Spirit-of-God". He said the CP offered him the "only avenue for some direct training" in this area.

In the past PG had been active in various church committees and leading children's church. However, because he could not openly share or "minister" in "spiritual gifts" in past years he had drawn back, the CP becoming a "substitute" for participation "at a certain degree" in his church. For him the CP was "a taster of what the real world church should be like". He valued his online relationships, describing them as more intimate than those in his church. For him Christian online community allowed all members to "minister, pray, prophesy, give and receive teaching online," with a wide variety of contacts and contexts.

When comparing CP interaction with their local church, members frequently described online experiences as beneficial or even vital in their personal spiritual development. A majority of questionnaire respondents (21 out of 30) identified CP involvement as a supplement to participating in their local church. Many qualified this, saying that while they saw local church participation as important, the CP filled in gaps in teaching and ministry unavailable to them. One individual commented, "We are very open to the prophetic in our church yet many of us are just developing our wings. The CP is a good sounding board to bounce things off and also keep up to date with what God is saying all over". (RR)

THE INTERNET AS AN ALTAR OF REMEMBRANCE

While some critics argue that online involvement encourages people to leave the local church for fellowship through their PCs, most CP members stressed online Christian community supports the local church rather than becoming its replacement. Observations and comments made in this case study suggested online community could even encourage involvement in the local church. By providing a ministry outlet and forum for learning unavailable offline the CP helped ease members' feelings of restlessness and resentment towards the local church. "I have been more content with my local church, for one thing, because my need in the area of being disciplined and having prophetic fellowship is being met through the CP". (RK)

In her interview, Louise Foot (LF) referred to the Internet as an "altar of remembrance"; a place to which she continually returns to remember God is alive, in control and at work in the world. LF became part of the CP as a result of a visit to the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, the church often linked to the "Toronto Blessing". Her pilgrimage to Toronto made a profound spiritual impact upon her. LF described an experience of inner healing from childhood hurts and encountering for the first time "the love of the Father". Upon returning home and sharing this experience with her church and friends she felt she was speaking a

foreign language to them. She wanted a place where she could talk about these experiences with others who could relate and be supportive. A friend in Colorado introduced her to the New Wine email list. For her, “getting on the mail list was a continuation of what I saw in Toronto”. She heard about the CP a few weeks before the prophetic training began and joined to be part of the class.

Logging on to the CP daily keeps LF “plugged in”, reminding her “there is this move of God happening” and she is part of it.

We build our little altars of remembrance...when you are plugging into that on the Internet, and you are seeing that God is saying the same thing to other people and he is working in the same way you are going, you know this is a real thing. It's really happening and God is really moving... It really is a lifeline in a lot of ways, 'cause it keeps you plugged in.¹⁹

By returning to this altar of remembrance her experiences with God and the worldwide Church are made alive again. However, her online involvement did breed discontent with her own church situation. LF commented that her local fellowship often narrows its focus to “us and no more”. This, she said, is because it is a small, independent, Charismatic fellowship of about 30 people in a rural community. Yet the Internet has not drawn her away from her local fellowship; it has been used as a tool to maintain her commitment to it.

Most of her church's activity revolves around the Sunday morning meeting, she says, and there is no organised outlet for fellowship beyond this. She finds being single in a small church composed mostly of families difficult. After church on a Sunday morning, “I am always standing there like...let's talk...what is God doing in your life this week. But everybody is kind of wandering to their cars and leaving and so I kind of feel like I am left standing there”. Tensions mounted until she felt she could no longer remain part of the fellowship. Yet it was a word shared on the CP that challenged her not to leave. She wrote:

I was getting ready to leave (my church) and then one day on the CP a word came forth that talked about not forsaking your local fellowship. It actually used the word fellowship...not church...so I felt that it was directly for me, just encouraging me to hang in there and not be so discouraged.²⁰

¹⁹ Personal Interview with Louise Foot, Harrisville, Michigan (USA) 18 June 1998

²⁰ CP Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Mon, 30 Mar 1998 11:20:05 -0500, Subject: Re: E-Mail Questionnaire

In her interview she said she printed off the specific post placing it on her refrigerator for a time to remind her of the importance of commitment to the local church. It was this online exhortation which motivated her to stay committed, to maintain her role as worship leader and not to give up trying to build deeper relationships with the fellowship. In the meantime involvement in the CP helped meet her need for greater connection and support. She said, "It really can plug you in when you are in a place where really that is all the fellowship that you have." Yet Foot also admitted online relationships do not completely satisfy her desire for relationships, stressing the need for "real life community" that can provide a hug or comfort.

As an altar of remembrance, the Internet is a place to re-connect with experiences of God by communicating to others with similar experiences and convictions. More importantly, it can encourage people to maintain offline connections by highlighting what the Internet does well, connecting people, and also what it lacks, face-to-face support.

COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY AS MYSTICAL COMMUNION

While the CP differs from the "real world" church in its manifestation and practices, it is not completely separated from it in its underlying theological beliefs and ideas. Though an online Christian community might appear quite different from a local church of a similar theological background in its form and structure of communication, it can be argued that its ministry focus and message is often quite similar. The CP supports a specific model or conception of the church; it can be linked to Dulles' model of the "Church as Mystical Communion" introduced in chapter one. In this model the Church is characterised as being a relationship not simply a community of relationships. It brings together the image of communion, as related to the Trinity, with an understanding of the mystical where the Holy Spirit is seen to direct relationships.

This is an inter-personal model stressing the horizontal dimension of relationship between the individual and the collective and the vertical dimension of community linked to God through the Holy Spirit. Church as Mystical Communion is often the focus of Charismatic or Pentecostal churches. Emphasis is placed on community experiences with the Holy Spirit. Prayer and spiritual gifts, as mentioned in I Corinthians 12. 1-11, are encouraged by the community. Individual experiences with the Spirit provide a common ground for communication within the community. Sharing these experiences with the community is seen to minister healing to members and encourages others outside it to enter into this wholeness.

The CP subscribes to a similar understanding of Church as outlined in this model linked to beliefs within many Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. Although CP members do not come from a single denomination²¹, they do subscribe to a common set of beliefs, most often associated with these types of churches. CP members agree on several key points. The main focus of the CP is learning to function in the gift of prophecy; thus a belief that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are still active in the contemporary Church today is central. This belief is voiced in the CP charter, where the “indwelling of the Holy Spirit” in the lives of Christians is emphasised. Most members and the leadership-core use the word “Christian” rather than their church affiliation to describe themselves. They emphasise belief over belonging. Stress is placed on the community’s common beliefs and individuals’ membership to specific denominations or groups is downplayed.

Some CP members associate themselves with more than one church group when describing their spiritual development or journey. One member from Minnesota (USA) noted she is a member of a Congregational church but often attends a local Charismatic church. She explained:

I'm very happy with the church in all its forms including denominational and non-denominational. The CP was just another expression of a relationship with Jesus Christ and His Church and His calling of us to be ministers of the gospel. (KB)²²

Like other CP members she is comfortable floating between different church traditions, giving loyalty to how she believes faith should be lived out, rather than to one group. This is expressed in Dulles’ model where the church is a “mystical” union of fluid, not bounded relationships. Community focuses on relationships. It is a communion with like minded believers and God, not strictly participation in institutional structures.

The focus on prophecy brings unity amidst the diverse backgrounds of its members. Relationship emerges as the Holy Spirit connects believers together. The CP maintains that some local churches might find difficulty relating to the CP,

There is a foundation of understanding of the prophetic (in the CP) that is not present in my home church. For this reason there is a mutual understanding of the

²¹ The questionnaire respondents listed 19 different denominational groupings; over half of these (18 out of 30) could be considered Pentecostal-Charismatic (Assembly of God, Elim, Vineyard, Non-Denominational, etc) with a range of other mainline churches being represented including Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Congregational and Nazarene.

²² CP Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Mon, 30 Mar 1998 12:01:50 -0600, Subject: ...no subject...

*terms, foundations and theology...of the Spirit that my pastor would have trouble identifying with. He doesn't understand where I'm coming from and how I can love my non-Charismatic, non-Prophetic Church and still belong to prophetic groups.*²³

The CP is also similar to Dulles' model in its belief that the Church as a community is based on relationships of experience. Common experience and communion with the Holy Spirit unites the community. Members are encouraged to engage with the Spirit on an individual level in ways that fit the communal experience of faith. These shared experiences give community members a basis for dialogue and breed connections between members. In an interview Charlotte Erasmuson described this as a "heart connection" between believers enabling them to be in relationship together and to be a sign to the world of the character of God. The Internet simply facilitates a connection already present between believers.

*I am sensing the Spirit of the Lord in people across the country and around the world...it's like, yes, you are the same family, we have the same dad...that's what I am experiencing on the Internet...it makes the Bride of Christ more feasible...not just something to read about.*²⁴

Online fellowship that transcends geographical boundaries links well with viewing Church as a mystical communion, a community transcending structural boundaries. It also sits well with the CP's view of Church as a community of the Spirit. A interviewee from England said the Internet and the CP break down barriers within Christianity which otherwise would limit God and the Holy Spirit to certain spheres.

*The Lord is not confined to the same geographical space... But so often I think we get bogged down by thinking that actually having a person there and laying hands on them makes it more likely to touch them by the Holy Spirit...When it comes to online ministry, why should we suppose the anointing cannot come as we type the words we are speaking to the Lord on a keyboard, and someone many miles away, reading those words can Amen the prayer? (SvR)*²⁵

Many of the CP's practices are similar to what one might observe or encounter in a "real world" Charismatic gathering, such as the above description of "laying on of hands" prayer. The CP supports a view of church stressing unity and emphasising the role of the Holy Spirit as facilitating common experiences linking the community.

²³ CP Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Mon, 30 Mar 98 16:49:08 -0600, Subject: Re: In response to your request

²⁴ Personal Interview with Charlotte Erasmuson, Wheaton, Illinois (USA), 6 June 1998.

²⁵ CP Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Thu, 9 Apr 1998 14:56:04 +0000, Subject: Re: E-mail Questionnaire

SUMMARY

This case study highlights online Christian community as a place where searching for information can lead to empathetic relationships, as members connect with people of similar beliefs, minds and experiences. The CP is described as a safe and supportive community where members learn about a specific understanding of prophecy and build relationships with others pursuing this gift. Findings can be summed up as follows.

Email eliminates certain visual cues, which enables some to communicate with more confidence. It also creates a conducive environment to learn to prophesy, encouraging members to function in the unseen spiritual realm. However, elements of concise communication and lack of non-verbal cues or accountability can also promote negative behaviour threatening community stability. Members deliberately interweave their online and offline experience by sharing information about the CP with their local church friends and describing real world experiences or details in their posts. This results in the blurring of boundaries between the two; both online and offline relationships comprise what many members understand as the global body of Christ.

CP members see the Internet as a social network, a community offering not only information, but also relationships unavailable in some members' local churches. The narrative of spiritual networking provides a cohesive identity to the CP. Members perceive of God as guiding and directing community relationships that have offline significance, demonstrated through prophecies and real world ministries being created. The CP strengths are the ability to provide information about prophecy, which members cannot obtain in their local church, and offering a forum of encouragement with feedback related to functions of the gift. Some members view the CP as a microcosm of what Christian community should look like and how Church should function. Linked to Dulles' model of the Church as Mystical Communion, the CP mirrors the beliefs of Charismatic-Pentecostal churches, emphasising ministering and functioning in the Spirit. Members seek not only to connect with individuals, but with spiritual experiences, through emailing prophetic words or recounting real world church experiences online.

Overall CP members described online community as a valuable sphere of interaction; many stated it provided opportunities for learning, ministry and building relationships unavailable in their local church. Their reaction is summed up by the reflections of American

homemaker RK, stating in her questionnaire, "I'm active in my church, but there is currently no understanding of the prophetic; therefore if I am to grow in this area I need an outside resource". She joined the CP with the knowledge and blessing of her pastor. Her involvement, she says, has satisfied her desire for "being disciplined and having prophetic fellowship" empowering her to step out more in her role as a worship leader. It has also "made her more content with her local church" because she now has "online brethren" to turn to for advice and encouragement. Several questionnaire respondents also stated online community helped pacify frustrations they experience with their local churches.

While CP members identified online community as important in their personal spiritual lives and spoke of the benefits it could bring to the "body of Christ" as a whole, many said this with a hint of hesitation. What seems to be needed is a balance between online and real world community involvement, by recognising the strengths and weaknesses inherent in both. This was voiced quite clearly in this quote made by one individual under the "additional comments" section of the questionnaire: "I have found once again that God has no limits and have discovered spiritual reality in cyber space. Live church can be 'dead' or even bring death in empty exercises...likewise cyber space participation sows death or life depending on whether the individual is sowing into his flesh (death) or into the Spirit (life). To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (Romans 8:6 RSV)."(JF)

Therefore, while online community meets certain needs for members such as fellowship or information, they noted limitations, especially relating to face-to-face interaction. Touch, body language and non-verbal exchange are obviously absent from online communication. The community values these aspects of expressing spiritual experience. While seeking prophecy in the realm of the unseen they have a strong desire to share the experience with others in an embodied way. For this reason several CP members described email as "incomplete" communication. The inability to put a hand on someone during prayer or show facial expressions of concern seemed to accentuate online constraints.

Embodied spiritual expressions were referred to as the "Chocolate Chip Cookie Factor", by a computer network administrator from Delaware (USA) in response to survey question "Do you believe you can care for members of the community as you do in a 'real world' (face-to-face) community?" He stated:

I believe a person can care and minister as much (but) not in a complete way. It would be difficult to email you a plate of chocolate chip cookies, or help you move to a new apartment. But listening, praying and communicating can be carried out online. (WO)²⁶

The “Chocolate Chip Cookie Factor” is about noting the strengths and limitations of online relationships. Email offers fast and instantaneous communication; thus many CP members indicated that the frequency of contact they have with Christians online is more significant than in their local church. Yet, there was debate concerning the depth of these contacts. WO stated online anonymity might enable people to be more open one-to-one, but trust in a relationship takes time. Without being able to look someone in the eyes this process might be drawn out. “Trustworthiness must be demonstrated...because of the lack of connection, trust is more difficult, but not impossible to build”. (WO) For CP members the “Chocolate Chip Cookie Factor” was the main reason online community can supplement, but not become a full substitute for involvement in a local church.

Examining the CP helps unpack what constitutes a Christian community and Church in the age of the Internet. The question, “Who is my neighbour?” quickly takes on a global perspective in an online setting. Many online Christian community members have expanded their conception of the “body of Christ” to include all the Christians with whom they communicate, both online and offline. They are not content to be involved solely in a local church, but see Church to be what Wellman refers to as the “glo-local”, the global community accessible through a local communication medium. For the CP and others, a global Church with local involvement is becoming a reality. While the “Chocolate-Chip Cookie Factor” keeps individuals seeking relationship offline, it cannot be denied that what many see as the Church “reaching all around the world” has become more than a conceptual picture. These same themes and ideas are explored further in the following case study chapters.

²⁶ CP Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Mon, 30 March 1998 9:17:47:03 EST, Subject: ...no subject...

CHAPTER 6

CASE STUDY TWO: THE ONLINE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of chapter six is to provide a profile of the Online Church (OLC), the second case study of this research project. Online communities typically congregate around a specific topic. However the OLC focus is not primarily on information exchange, but on creating a supportive network of Christians, especially those who are blind or deaf. This chapter utilises a similar structure to chapter five. First, an overview of the OLC is presented, followed by a synopsis of three phases of research from the case study. Secondly, the OLC is explored thematically. In the "OLC and the Online Context", how technology influences communication style and practices is considered. In the "OLC and the Real World" attempts made by the community to connect their online and offline lives are described. In the "OLC as a Community" the community narrative is described examining how it functions and promotes itself as a support network and relates to the Social Network model of the Internet. In the "OLC reflects on the Real World Church" examples of how members critique the real world church based on their online experiences are highlighted. Also how the OLC relates to Dulles' models of the Church as Herald and the Church as Servant are identified. Finally, a concise summary of the key findings of this case study is offered.

OVERVIEW OF THE ONLINE CHURCH

The Online Church (OLC) is a small email conference set up for Christians to share personal problems, ask questions related to the Bible and offer prayer requests or praise reports. Most members see the community focused on facilitating relationships, which give and receive encouragement. The supportive atmosphere is something members strive to create as one frequent poster noted:

One thing I really love about this List is that I am totally at home. I have been on other electronic lists which have proved far too intellectual for me and, although the Word has been shared, it was at a level at which I felt unable to contribute. Our aims are basically to love and encourage one another. (Well, that's how things seem to me)!

(Date sent: Thu, 29 Oct 1998 23:38:55 +0000, Subject: Re: Delurking...)

OLC members are very open about their personal lives. Members often offer ongoing progress reports related to their offline lives in order to gain community support. During the case study one individual chronicled her battle with anorexia for several weeks, giving daily updates of her struggles to eat and not purge. At the same time the saga of a member's daughter working in Paris as a model was shared asking for prayer for her.

Unlike the Community of Prophecy (CP) it was difficult to identify the OLC list moderator. The only indication of the list owner was given in the introductory email received when individuals join the list. The community is more free-formed than hierarchical; the moderator steps in only to address technical problems or to remind members of length limits on email posts. The OLC, however, tend to be overseen by a frequent posters core whose emails and input tends to guide list discussions and the character of the community.

The OLC is very different from the CP in many respects, most noticeably in its focus and communication practices. Compared to the CP the OLC does not have a clearly defined structure or agenda. Rather than gathering around a specific topic, it is unified through a specific communicative act, providing support and encouragement. Members often describe the OLC as "family" and emphasise it is a caring community. Members see themselves as having been brought out of the world to this bit of cyberspace to support one another. As one frequent poster commented:

*All here on OLC we are special friends - yes, more than that - we are brothers and sisters 'in Christ'. We are to help and encourage one another and to pray for one another as each has a need. How blessed it is to do this!*¹

The list founder and former moderator, Peter Stuart from Denver (USA), acknowledges the list is more focused on encouragement than sharing information, making the following comment in an email:

*I like the fact that OLC is more of a support group for believers than a place where Christians come to debate and argue, so keep up the good work.*²

Stuart remains active in the list, reading and posting regularly. He believes one of the purposes of the OLC is to function "like a church", by providing a supportive environment

¹ Email sent to OLC, Date sent: Tue, 24 Nov 1998 13:39:15 +0000; Subject: Re: To a friend of Mine

² Email sent to OLC, Date sent: Wed, 3 Jun 1998 09:06:20 -0600, Subject: watching and reading

for people. His main motivation for starting the OLC was from meeting numerous people on the Internet who didn't go to church, but referred to themselves as Christians. He explained,

Lots of them had bad experiences, had feelings hurt...or become confused about what the church was all about and I thought OLC could help bridge that gap if there was one. That helped people at least realise that there are some other Christians that experience some of the same things.³

This desire to bridge the gap between disassociated Christians and the church influences the type of community that has emerged. Many members have emailed him privately sharing how the OLC has helped them, "not necessarily come back to God, but it became a little bit more focused since they weren't in Church and started looking for a Church again". Peter has a Bible College degree and worked for a time as an itinerant minister. This background influences his understanding of what he refers to as being part of a local New Testament Church. The OLC is to serve as a bridge to the local church and is also described as a "ministry in its own right" by encouraging members in their faith and leading them into fellowship with other believers. He is hopeful that the OLC can help, "keep people interested in staying in a local church and trying to work through a body of believers like that".

Another unique aspect of the OLC is that many of its members are sensory impaired. While the community was not expressly created for blind or deaf individuals, many have gravitated towards this list due to their contact with Stuart and other members who are blind. Many members use special computer screens or voice activation software to facilitate their online involvement. The absence of physical limitations online therefore is key, influencing the gathering of this community. This is explored further in this chapter.

OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDY

This case study followed the same three phases of research strategy utilised in the initial case study, with a few alterations being made. This entailed participant-observation, distribution of an email questionnaire and face-to-face interviews with selected community members. A synopsis of these results is given in this section.

³ Personal Interview with Peter Stuart, Denver, Colorado (USA), 11 September 1999

PHASE 1- PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION RESULTS

Phase one involved participant-observation in the OLC from 9 November to 20 December 1998. The participant-observation period was shortened from ten to six weeks, after it was observed that 10-weeks generated a larger body of data than was necessary to draw a conclusion about the behaviour and characteristics of the community. Observation of the OLC began 6 months before contacting the list moderator about the possibility of including this community in the study. Therefore, a general picture of the community had already been established before the case study officially started.

A week before the case study began a “delurking” message was sent to the list, announcing the researcher’s presence and offering members the opportunity to interact with any questions or concerns. While noting the role of researcher the community’s emails addressed this announcement as simply a new community member joining. As one member commented, “we do trust that your stay on the OLC List will not just be a working exercise but will continue to be of great spiritual help and blessing to all”. (CP)⁴ This atmosphere of inclusion and encouragement was observed to be express towards all new members as they disclosed their presence to the group.

The focus of phase one was to observe the relationships and communication habits within this community and identify how their online influenced or interacted with their offline lives and church experience. During the six weeks of observation a log of all email posts was kept as well as a research diary of comments on various discussion threads and events happening on the list. Unlike involvement in the CP, a strict observer role was taken in this case study. The only emails being sent to the list during this study consisted of the previously mentioned “delurking” posts and requests for volunteers to respond to the questionnaires, sent out at the conclusion of the participant-observation period. This decision was partly made due to technical problems experienced by the researcher over the six weeks, enabling reading but not posting of emails. Being identified as a “research lurker” created challenge. This is discussed during the second phase of the research section.

The OLC generated 421 emails over the six weeks of observation, an average of 70 messages per week. Twenty-nine different individuals made posts to the list over the case

⁴ Email sent to OLC, Date sent: Thu, 29 Oct 1998 23:38:55 +0000, Subject: Re: Delurking...

study period with an average of 16 people posting emails each week. It was observed that a core of six individuals dominated the discussions. While the OLC is a relatively small community, in terms of membership and numbers of posts compared to the other case studies, it demonstrated the highest levels of personal investment from its members. Investment could be measured in terms of emotional content and amount of personal details shared in email posts.

The most frequent types of post were affirmations directed towards specific members or the community as a whole; 19 of the 29 individuals made posts like these. The focus of these types of post was to validate the person or group, as the poster attempts to relate to the struggles of another and demonstrate that they care about the person and situation they are addressing. The second most frequent type of email posts were requests for prayer or offering prayer support to members (15 of the 27 members). Prayer request ranged from health problems, struggles with depression, personal financial issues and request concerning members' friends or family. Typically requests also provided personal details about members.

Other characteristics of the OLC were identified during the participant-observation period such as descriptions of the OLC as a family, a support network and a "blind" medium. These themes are explored more in-depth in later sections of this chapter.

PHASE 2- QUESTIONNAIRE/SURVEY RESULTS

Phase two involved administering an email questionnaire three weeks after the participant-observation period was completed. The delay was due to technical problems and the Christmas-New Year holidays where posting to the OLC was erratic. The purpose of the second phase was to explore in greater depth how members viewed the OLC and how they linked involvement to their real world relationships.

The role of researcher as observer/lurker caused complications when it came to soliciting volunteers for the questionnaire. The initial request for volunteers gathered only four volunteers, with three completing the questionnaires. A week and a half later a second request for volunteers was posted with a copy of the questionnaire. This solicited no additional responses. Two weeks later, another request was posted to the list along with the questionnaire appealing to the supportive nature of the community.

In terms of methodology making a personalised appeal to OLC members may appear questionable, as if playing on the community's emotions. However, it was observed during phase one, appeals for support and affirmation were standard postings in the OLC. After two initial unsuccessful requests it was necessary to present the request in terms more familiar with the culture of the community. This approach was significantly more successful.

At the same time personal requests were sent to the 12 most frequent posters during the case study period. While aware this personal appeal and prodding the list to participate might detract from the representativeness of the sampling, a low response rate was noted as more problematic than the strategy taken. Six individuals responded to the personal email appeals and two other list members responded to the general request, bringing the total to 11 respondents.

Several members viewed this third request almost as a challenge to the community. The low participation seemed counter to the image the OLC tries to create of a caring, supportive group. Several members expressed this under posts with the subject headline "Kindness", advocating that others volunteer. As one email stated, "In the end, it is just about passing on the same loving kindness, which God lavishes on us each day."⁵

Responding to the survey was interpreted as an act of kindness not only to the researcher but also to this community of fellow Christians. Overall 12 completed questionnaires were collected. While it is a relatively small sample it is proportional to representing roughly 34% of the average size of the community (of 35 members). This process of gathering data provided valuable insight into the OLC. In an online community posting equals presence, those who post are considered active members. In some communities lurkers are treated with distaste or even distrust. In the OLC those who post most frequently set the community agenda and try to maintain its supportive atmosphere. Lurkers and infrequent posters, while not consciously described as such, can be treated as "2nd class" members in terms of the amount of support or responses they receive.

Another reason many did not respond was the length of the questionnaire. Some found the format rather overwhelming as many members use voice software to read and interact with email. The questionnaire was equivalent to two A4 sheets of paper and required more time

⁵ Email sent to OLC, Date sent: Sat, 13 Feb 1999 13:49:34 +0000, Subject: Re: KINDNESS . . .

for reflection than a typical post made to the OLC. One respondent wrote that she struggled to complete the questionnaire due to only being able to type with one finger because of paralysis in her right hand and arm. Length and format in relation to blind computer users were considered in questionnaire design. Yet, in retrospect, a pre-test with blind users before the actual distribution may have been needed to avoid the intimidation many felt upon viewing the questionnaire.

The twelve respondents were split between males (7) and females (5). This seemed quite consistent with the membership, as 16 of the 29 posters during the case study were men. The average age of the respondents was 49 years old. Almost all respondents were married (11 of the 12) with three being the average number of people per household. They represented a variety of professions, three identified themselves as homemakers and others indicated such professions as clergy, computer consultant and unemployed due to disabilities. The majority came from the USA (7) with Canada (2), the UK (2) and Malta (1) also being represented. Nine individuals identified themselves as being active in the church they attended with two indicating they currently were not attending any church and one saying they were not involved in church activities outside attending worship services on Sundays. Three members indicated they attended Baptist churches while others represented diverse denominations including Brethren, Catholic, Episcopal, Pentecostal and Presbyterian. About half of the respondents (5) had been members of the OLC for two years or more with the average membership being 19 months overall. The reasons given for joining were primarily for Christian contact (4) and fellowship with others (4). Encouragement, fellowship and support were listed as the benefits they received from the OLC.

The questionnaire was similar to the one distributed to the CP consisting of three sections of "Background Information", "Questions Relating to the Online Church" and "Questions Relating to Email & Internet Usage". Wording alterations were made to the questionnaire in some questions making them specific to the OLC. Also a few questions were changed from open ended to range selection questions. A copy of this questionnaire is found in the Appendix B.

PHASE 3- INTERVIEW RESULTS

Phase three involved conducting in-depth face-to-face interviews with four OLC members selected from the questionnaire respondents, two in the UK and two in the USA. These

included two individuals from the frequent poster core, one infrequent poster and the list founder/owner. The UK interviews were conducted in April 1999 and the USA interviews were conducted in September 1999. The purpose of the third phase was to investigate how OLC members integrate their online and offline lives and to verify impressions they gave of themselves online. The two members indicated they currently did not have a church outside the OLC, therefore these interviews also focused on discovering why they were not involved in a local church. Interviews varied in length from 2-5 hours some being conducted in several parts over two days. Interviews were conducted in members' homes and involved observing and discussing Internet usage habits, casual conversation about issues of faith, interaction with other family members and friends and in two cases visiting the members' home churches.

CARLA PRASHER

"I think OLC's strength and why a lot of blind Christians go to OLC is that there is there a community who not only cares but understands what blind Christians in particular are going through...I don't know that a local church could do any better."

Carla Prasher, a 50 year-old housewife married and living in London, England. She has been a member of the OLC for over two years. Several members referred to her as "Auntie Carla"; as a frequent poster she is known for offering encouragement and advice to individuals.

Carla was born blind and her visual impairment became a key motivation for getting Internet access, as the specialist speech software she uses requires particular support services that can be easily acquired online. She has used computers for over 10 years while working as a secretary and telephonist. Coming online extended her ability to communicate with others and more easily get the technical help she requires. She encourages blind people to get online because "many of the books that are out there just have never been available to us, so we can get things that we have never been able to get before".

She joined the OLC to be part of a Christian community even when she is unable to leave home due to ill health. She appreciates having contact with other visually impaired Christians who can relate to "the same sort of difficulties that I have known in becoming integrated in a main stream church situation".⁶ In her experience local churches often lack

⁶ Personal email response to questionnaire, Date sent: Sat, 13 Feb 1999 17:07:20 +0000, To: HEIDI CAMPBELL 9604596@lewis.sms.ed.ac.uk, Subject: OLC MAILING LIST QUESTIONNAIRE

the ability to provide the acceptance and assistance blind people require. The OLC meets this need to be understood and to be able to talk about these issues.

While not currently involved in a church Carla was active in a Pentecostal church in Reading for many years, leaving it six years ago when she married and moved to London where her husband's job is. Since then she describes her current church attendance as "spasmodic", usually occurring when she is able to spend a weekend with friends in Reading, about four or five times a year. Her infrequent attendance is not because of a lack of desire to be involved in a local church, rather it has been a "long saga" of visiting local churches and finding it very hard to fit in. For this reason she highly values the Christian friends the OLC has given her, as those who care for her.

While she highly values the role the OLC plays in her life she identifies it as incomplete. She stated, "The fact that I do not have a regular church at present is of great sadness to me. The OLC is not something which takes the place of a local church for me and never will be." The OLC meets her needs for the sharing and caring aspect of church, but not her desire for the "continuing teaching aspect". She explains, "You can't live a total church life, within OLC... You don't run Sunday school classes. You don't, you don't involve yourself in, in leading music", For these needs she relies on visiting other Christian web sites, listening to RealAudio Christian radio programs and subscribing to a few daily Bible reading lists that offer devotional posts.

BRIAN DARRINGTON

"I feel in control on the Internet in a way in which I wouldn't be able to have the same freedom in the wider world."

Brian Darrington is a freelance web site developer from Clevedon, England. The interview took place at his home over a two day period including visiting his church and spending time with his church small group leaders. Brian has a condition called Retinitis Pigmentosa, limiting his eyesight to tunnel vision so he has only 2 or 3 percent of the normal sight window. This means he walks with a cane and has to scan his eyes around to read a book or computer screen. Through enlarging the character point size, adjusting computer screen colours to light on dark and using a special magnifying screen he is able to work with a standard computer.

At the time of the interview he had been a member of the OLC for nine months coming across it "largely by accident" through a web site and joining Christian fellowship with other

visually impaired Christians. During the case study Brian's posts to the list were primarily responses to other members' prayer requests or words of encouragement. Through out his interview he validated the OLC as a supportive community. As he stated in an email, "It is great to see people chilling out and being real Kingdom people with softened hearts... I love having an e-mail hug and being encouraged in faith by ordinary chatter."⁷

He values the OLC because members can relate to his struggles with his eyesight. "OLC members know how I feel, because they feel much the same. I do not have a chance to share at this level in my local church."⁸ He spoke of becoming frustrated at consistently having to clarify details about his blindness when speaking with people. For him the OLC is "home ground", a place where he doesn't have to explain and members understand which is comforting to him.

Darrington finds the OLC an important place for fellowship stating, "Jesus is still alive here at OLC, I often meet him there".⁹ Yet he does not see it as replacing his involvement in the local Baptist Church. He described his "special ministry" focusing on one-to-one encouragement and support to marginalised people taking place at home and in church. Though not a formal church ministry, his small group leader confirmed this in a conversation saying, "coming alongside people who need a listening ear or encouragement, Brian has a special gift for that". Brian also attends a weekly church prayer meeting and helps out with Alpha¹⁰ courses.

RICK METTS

"Since I don't really go to church the church loses me, so in a way it takes away from them that I participate in my church on the Internet. But it (the Internet) adds to me because I am able to gain something by being involved with people and with the church."

Rick Metts is 41 years old and lives in the St Louis, Missouri area with his wife and two children. Currently he is unemployed due to his disabilities, being partially deaf and blind. He acquired his first computer in December 1996 and subscribed to AOL. He soon got email and found his way onto the chat rooms circuit, being interested in socialising with other

⁷ Email sent to OLC, Date sent: Thu, 1 Apr 1999 10:28:24 +0100, Subject: Re: Empty churches

⁸ Personal email response to questionnaire, Date sent: Fri, 12 Feb 1999 01:56:38 +0000, To: HEIDI CAMPBELL 9604596@lewis.sms.ed.ac.uk, Subject: Re: a request for you

⁹ Personal Interview with Brian Darrington, Clevedon, England (UK), 24 April 1999

¹⁰ Alpha Courses are evangelistic outreach courses featuring fellowship meals, videos and small group discussions.

deaf/blind groups. Through a chat room he met a Christian who introduced him to the OLC and has now been a member for over two years.

Rick considers his involvement in the OLC as equal to being active in a church. He describes the OLC as a church community, “it’s a place where people get together... that’s what a community is to me, socialising, passing information, passing prayer, passing information about scripture”.¹¹

At the time of the interview Rick did not attend any church. This was due to constant frustration at his inability to hear and follow a church service and being unable to communicate clearly with the others. He said, “because I knew I couldn’t understand it so I didn’t bother going to church.” Since his conversion in 1995 most of his Christian input has come from engagement with Christian media such as Christian television programs or radio shows. When he learned he could receive Christian material online he felt the Internet must be “heaven sent”. Until getting online he felt very alone in his Christian walk. Christian chat rooms and email lists filled his longing for fellowship and teaching. The OLC has become his church, “I was seeking for some kind of real church on the Internet...and we may not have mass or communion, but we have education, we have teaching, we have a pat on the back”.

While he has on occasion visited the Catholic Church his wife and children regularly attend he says he has never felt comfortable there. He says his family accepts his decision to participate in church online. “She (my wife) gets her satisfaction from participating in the church and I get my satisfaction with participating in my OLC, participating in a congregation with what is going on around me.”

Because online participation uses written communication, he can communicate more easily with his “electronic church”. He also values the OLC for the support it has given him and compared his first year as a member to having a year of counselling. He described OLC members during that time as “my psychiatrists, they were my counsellors, they were my social worker. And that was email, that was not face-to-face and not over the phone”. He also referred to the OLC as his “family” and said he felt closer to members of the OLC than his real family who describe him as a “fanatic” and who are unwilling to listen to the

¹¹ Personal Interview with Rick Metts, Overland, Missouri (USA), 4 September 1999

information he shares on his Christian beliefs. The OLC helps him deal with the isolation he feels due to his disabilities and faith convictions.

PETER STUART

“The OLC’s just a group of people that are believers in the same basic Bible teachings. The real world church has a bigger scope than what OLC does...But it’s doing the same thing we do in OLC, trying to encourage each other to remain faithful.”

Peter Stuart is a 47-year-old computer sales consultant from Denver, Colorado. He also serves as a non-stipendiary assistant minister at a small Pentecostal church where his duties include giving announcements, leading testimony time and occasionally preaching. Peter is list owner and founder of the OLC, designed as an online forum for Christian support. It was not specifically designed just for visually impaired Christians, he says, but a significant number of members are blind or have other impairments. He feels the mixture of sighted and blind people makes the OLC a unique community because, “sighted people actually hear some of the things that blind people are discussing, problems that they faced in churches, and that’s why some blind people aren’t in churches”.¹²

He referred to the OLC as a “finely tuned community” even in comparison to other Christian online groups by centring on openness and focusing discussion around personal or spiritual encouragement, not just exchanging information. He says OLC members, “are logged on there in agreement, that we are not going to argue and debate as much as we are going to support and fellowship”.

Peter considers himself “a subscriber as well as one of the original founders of the list” saying he often uses the OLC as a place to receive encouragement when he is stressed, as well as a place he can help others through offering prayer support. He stated clearly that the OLC is not meant to replace the local church and stresses involvement in the local church is important for all Christians. Peter recognised some members are not involved in a church for various reasons, yet says it is not ideal for members not to be part of a local body of believers. “I would hate to ...use an electronic church as my only source of contact with other Christians, but if that’s all a person has then it can be a ministry to them as well”.

¹² Personal Interview with Peter Stuart, Denver, Colorado (USA) 11 September 1999

For him the OLC and the local church should work together, the electronic church serving as an extension of the church by connecting believers from all over the world and providing encouragement for those isolated from Christian contact. While a local church is community minded, an online community offers a global perspective. "On OLC there's an atmosphere of fellowship that is generated just by the nature of the list itself and that's true in a local New Testament church."

This section provides an overview of the OLC, how research data was collected and the general findings of the case study. The OLC has been portrayed as an online community for Christians serving as a place where members are encouraged to discuss personal problems, offer encouragement and share prayer requests, especially those with similar views and disabilities. Emphasis on support and encouragement over information exchange are unpacked in the next four sections. The themes of the OLC and the Online Context, Real World, as a Community and Reflection on the Church offer an in-depth analysis of the case study data.

THE ONLINE CHURCH AND THE ONLINE CONTEXT

This section examines how the OLC adapts to online communication, focusing on how an online community develops patterns of behaviour while communicating through the Internet. Email technology offers new communication options to people in both form and content. How the Internet functions as a "blind" medium is discussed, as the absence of visual cues produces positive outcomes for visually or physically impaired people. How the online context creates a space where individuals feel free to disclose personal information is also considered. The challenges of online communication as well as its benefits are also noted, highlighting attempts made by the OLC to address online limitations of sharing emotional support through cyberhugs.

THE INTERNET IS "BLIND"

Email is a written medium blocking out verbal and non-verbal cues.¹³ It empowers those who have limitations in oral communication, but have in computer access an opportunity to express themselves more easily. Half of the questionnaire respondents (6 out of 12) felt they

¹³ This is changing due to the advent of electronic voice mail, a voice activated email system that several people on the OLC have begun to utilise about a year after the case study period.

“talked” differently online compared with real life and appreciated email because it allowed more time for reflection. Many felt free to be more open online, stating they share “more personal things with people I barely know online, where in real life I don't share intimate personal things with just casual acquaintances”. (BT)

Members said email freed them from real world constraints and prejudices. In his interview Rick Metts said in the “real world” he often struggles to understand conversations taking place around him. Because he reads lips he has to focus on a person's mouth, so rarely is able to make direct eye contact with people. This has caused him difficulties and frustration in the past when he has tried to participate in a church with others who “don't know what to do to communicate with me”. OLC members appreciate online communication because it masks their limitations; in email they are judged by what they type and not their disabilities.

Several members commented that Christians and the Church could learn how people should be treated from online communication. The list owner reported individuals have joined the OLC because it was a Christian email list and later commented that it took them a while to realise other members were blind or hearing-impaired. This, he says, shows the OLC represents the acceptance the Church should exhibit towards those with disabilities. Online “you don't know someone's blind unless somebody says it on a mailing list” so people can get to know others without preconceived notions about them. The fact that certain aspects of individuals can be hidden online is an advantage, giving people an opportunity to associate with those they might shy away from in real life.

The Internet, Rick Metts claims, allows individuals to “see the spirit of the person” and judge them on the basis of what they say and not how they look.

I think that every church should have a chat room, where people can hide themselves and ask a question about Bible stuff, and don't have to be embarrassed. If I sign on as “readyforjesus” you don't know who I am, you just see the spirit of Rick Metts. You don't see that deaf-blind guy that comes to your church, who is asking those old questions, where you can release judgement.¹⁴

Since many OLC members are limited in the ways they can interact with people due to their physical disabilities, the Internet becomes a place of equality for them. Most questionnaire respondents felt they would be more isolated and limited in their ability to interact with

¹⁴ Personal Interview with Rick Metts, Overland, Missouri (USA), 4 September 1999

people without Internet access. One respondent, who is wheelchair-bound from MS and legally blind, finds the Internet a vital tie for her to the outside world. "I am unable to do much else other than watch TV. Listen to the radio or tapes from 'Recordings for the Blind'. This way I hear often from my daughter in Georgia, sister and friends in Illinois, cousins in Oklahoma and Montana. I am not as lonely." (W/NR) The Internet extends members' abilities and options for communication.

THE INTERNET AS A COUNSELLING CENTRE

It has been stressed that the OLC's focal point is support and encouragement. This focus and the nature of online communication encourage members to disclose information. By eliminating certain communication barriers and creating a place where people feel less inhibited the Internet can become a counselling centre with the OLC serving as counsellor. The OLC can be characterised as a place of confession where comfort and coping advice are offered. This was clearly illustrated in week two when one member, in her sixth post within two days, confessed her struggles with depression. She presented her situation as serious saying she is "about at my rope's end" and asked for prayer.

I don't know where to begin. I have been very depressed lately, and I find myself crying a lot and getting upset about things. I'm also finding it hard to deal with stressful issues here, as well.... Please pray for me. I try to talk to someone here, but he gets mad when I get upset.

This is nothing new, as it has gone on for years.

(Date sent: Tue, 17 Nov 1998 16:20:51 -0600, Subject: Depression)

This elicited numerous community emails offering encouragement and advice. Public confession on the OLC triggers communal acceptance and praise. Members' willingness to openly confess their struggles helps validate the community and affirm its goal of being a caring community. As one member responds to this confession:

I'm sorry to hear of your trouble. I'll be praying with all my heart, that God will comfort you during this time. I'll also pray that he will give you much wisdom as to how to deal with all of the stress. You have been so faithful to pray for all of us, and we really appreciate all those prayers. Anyway, PLEASE take good care.

(Date sent: Tue, 17 Nov 1998 19:40:57 -0400, Subject: Re: Depression)

The OLC often appears inwardly focused; members can seem dependent on community resources for help. Pointing to resources outside the OLC or the Internet for emotional support is infrequent. Rick Metts expressed this idea saying "The Internet is like a library,

but it is also like a living library because you have real people there that you can get information from". The OLC becomes a counselling resource centre, a place to turn for coping information that members provide.

Confessions in the OLC commonly are a mixture of statements of struggles or prayer requests highlighting problems. Members posting what appear to be urgent cries for help may on the same day post other emails interspersed with upbeat praise or advice to others. Emotional content is played up or down depending on the moment the individual writing sends the post. This can make an individual appear schizophrenic or emotionally flighty. It also highlights the tendency to send off an email in the heat of the moment, with people unloading their feeling immediately. The Internet serving as a confessional is a consistent trend on the OLC, which can be both positive and negative.

AFFECTION ONLINE AND CYBERHUGS

While the lack of visual cues can be freeing, it can also cause frustration for those who want to express emotion or concern online. Emoticons are often used to bridge this gap and have already been discussed in some length. In chapter five it was highlighted that emoticons can be community specific, certain symbols used by a particular group as a form of group identity or to communicate ideas specific to that community. This is also true in the OLC with the use of "cyberhugs". While cyberhugs are not exclusive to the OLC, how they are expressed is unique.

Cyberhugs first appeared during week two of the case study. While it was observed that primarily women on the list were openly affectionate towards other members, a male member made this post.

Hi Brothers and sisters, I think we are overdue for a cyber hug.

(((((((((((((((SQUEEZING BEAR HUG))))))))))))))))))))

Thank you Lord, for my OLC family! And Lord bless my OLC family with whatever they are in need of...

(Date sent: Tue, 17 Nov 1998 15:58:18 -0600, Subject: Time for a cyber hug)

The cyberhug was happily received by the group and reciprocated. From this point onwards members often used cyberhugs when others expressed that they were experiencing hard

times. Typically they were represented as a series of parentheses around the word “hug” followed by words of approval:

Prayers and (((((((HUGS)))))) to a precious, and valued, sister.
(Date sent: Wed, 18 Nov 1998 11:19:14 +0000, Subject: Re: Depression)

Other times they were expressed by surrounding the person’s name, (((((((Heidi))))))¹⁵ or as extended words. One member adopted a trademark of ending her post with a cyber-squeeze, as expressed here:

Bunches more lovings and squeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEezings for all my Loving Ones.
(Date sent: Wed, 18 Nov 1998 09:45:36 -0600, Subject: Re: Time for a cyber hug)

Cyberhugs were interpreted as signs of affirmation, expressing care and concern for an individual or the whole community. Brian Darrington commented that he felt cyberhugs were used to cheer up people who are “a little bit down” and claims this does help. For him a cyberhug means,

Literally ‘I am giving you a hug, ‘cause I don’t have the right words for you, so here’s a little hug.’ ... (it’s) trying to make contact with people in a sort of way which is not possible basically. Some times you give people a little touch on the arm and a cyberhug is one way, in my way of thinking. Jesus used to touch people, so that’s my way of doing it.¹⁶

He stressed that while it is not the same as a real hug in some ways it is better and safer, allowing members to show love without violating people’s personal space or drawing wrong conclusions about male-female interactions. Cyberhugs within the OLC are attempts to bridge the gap between online and offline contact by providing emotional support in line with the safe and supportive environment the community tries to create.

This section has highlighted that the Internet ability to break down social barriers by eliminating visual and non-verbal cues offers OLC members freedom to be vulnerable with each other and be judged by their written communication and not their disabilities.

¹⁵ The researcher received a cyberhug like this on two occasions in a personal email from community members and in the comment section of one of the questionnaire responses.

¹⁶ Personal Interview with Brian Darrington, Clevedon, England (UK), 24 April 1999.

Limitations of email forces them to discover new ways to express the care and concern they feel for other members, which is the community's primary focus.

THE ONLINE CHURCH AND THE REAL WORLD

This section examines the OLC relationship with the "real world", how this community adapts and connects online and offline experiences. Two areas relating to this linkage are highlighted. First, how members obtain and offer online advice concerning members' offline struggles is considered. Secondly attempts made by OLC members to become involved in other offline lives is addressed. These demonstrate how patterns of caring online elicit emotional investment in the online community.

ONLINE HELP FOR OFFLINE PROBLEMS

As in the CP, members of the OLC consciously bring aspects of their offline lives into their online conversations. This is primarily manifest by members sharing personal problems and posting prayer requests. In doing so other members rally around them and these prayer requests, providing input into their offline problems. Real world crises help formulate community identity and cohesion, giving the community a focal point to demonstrate care. Once a prayer request is posted, members often solicit more information or ask for updates on the crisis.

Through sharing real world prayer needs members enable the community to become invested in their lives. It also allows them to form alliances by agreeing with others' actions or perspectives on a given incident. In week four a discussion concerning "new clothes" emerged between four female members. One member expressed her frustration towards her husband about his being angry with her for purchasing new clothes through QVC, a television home shopping network. This discussion began through an email response to another member's prayer request, where she stated, "I also pray that our husbands don't get mad when we buy new clothes for the Holidays. Especially when they can be worn any time of the year".¹⁷ A member emailed support to her:

I like that idea of praying that our husbands will accept our need for new clothes. I haven't had much new clothes in the last few years. We have been raising a family

¹⁷ Email sent to OLC , Date sent: Wed, 2 Dec 1998 22:18:23 -0600, Subject: Re: prayer

on a limited income. The two oldest are semi independent so maybe soon I can buy some new clothes again.

(Date sent: Thu, 3 Dec 1998 11:30:33 -0500, Subject: Re: prayer)

This member also shared openly about the financial struggle her family was experiencing. Two other members also sent emails on the topic of new clothes and financial problems stating they too had difficulties in buying clothes due to their disabilities. Besides providing a discussion tread this topic resulted in at least one individual responding to the real world needs expressed. In her interview Carla Prasher said she had been sent a jumper from another list member after she posted an email on this topic relating how one of her only two good winter suits had been ruined.

Individuals not only offer prayer requests, but other members often solicit them. It seems that through prayer requests some members keep tabs on how others are doing and their investment in the community. Several times members directed posts to specific individuals concerning progress in a situation where prayer was requested from the list. As in the post below, real life situations are not overlooked, but are held onto as a point of contact for members.

As I was thinking about sending our regular news update, it occurred to me that we haven't heard from some of you these days and I am certainly keen to hear news because it helps me in my prayers for you. VI, how's the throat? AR, how are you coping these days? (Write privately if you wish; it would be good to hear). LL, how are things with you and your mother-in-law? What about the eating?...BT, I know I still have that tape to do . . . Hope I haven't missed too many others. Even if I haven't mentioned you by name, you are precious ones!

(Date sent: Wed, 18 Nov 1998 22:41:50 +0000, Subject: DOES ANYONE HAVE ANYTHING TO SHARE?)

Monitoring prayer requests is not only done in public post; members commented how they frequently received private emails from other members checking up on them. Connecting personally with absent or silent members demonstrated the high levels of concern within the OLC, seeing itself as a family.

I've been rather quiet on the list lately. Lots going on. Just the same, I'm praying for you all. Thanks PF for checking on me. It just so happens that the thyroid scan is this morning.

(Date sent: Thu, 3 Dec 1998 06:41:20 -0700, Subject: Re: Update)

Brian Darrington referred to these as "emails on the side" explaining they show the community's care is not just demonstrated on the list, but in attempts made to maintain

contact outside it. Taking an interest in members, monitoring prayer requests and their progress demonstrates how online support for offline problems involves the community in members' daily lives.

GOING BEYOND THE SCREEN

While offering encouragement via email is a hallmark of the OLC, members also demonstrated a willingness and desire to go beyond email to input into members' situations. Online cries for prayer elicited more than email response as OLC members tried to bridge the gap between the online and offline context by offering or giving help. This was demonstrated clearly in two instances during the case study.

In week one a member (SB) from rural mid-west America shared news of her impending eye surgery scheduled for week four of the case study. Without asking, her news solicits many offers of prayer, consistent with the supportive character of the OLC. One member from the UK asked if there were ways that she would like support from her OLC family during this time. Several others expressed concern as to whether or not she will be able to share information about the surgery and her progress while she is seemingly absent from the OLC. Members asked specifically about her computer access during this time, since consistent email contact and information are important commodities within the community. One email stated:

Thanks for reminding us about your eye surgery. Is there anyone near enough (from OLC) I wonder who can keep in touch with SB during this time by phone, or whatever? Tell us again, where you are. How long do you expect to be in hospital or away from the computer? Will you have access to a computer in hospital, or a phone? This may help us in keeping in touch.

(Date sent: Wed, 18 Nov 1998 18:51:23 +0000, Subject: Re: update)

SB responded to this need for information from the community by creating an announcement list providing a journal account of her progress. When she underwent the surgery one OLC member, subscribed to this separate email journal list, consistently forwarded posts to the OLC so the community was kept up-to-date with her recovery progress. SB commented in her journal that while she was unable to respond to many of her emails, due to eyestrain, she received numerous notes from the community wishing her good health and offering prayer. While it is not clear whether any OLC member ever made offline contact with SB during her surgery or recovery period, a desire to make that link was expressed by several members.

A second instance involved the list owner in week four when he posted a prayer request concerning a financial need in his church. Until this point in the case study he had not posted any personal information. His email voiced concern for his real world church, which owed a significant amount in bills that needed to be paid within a month's time.

We need about 1500 dollars. Last week, we raised about 500 dollars. Please pray this money comes in before mid December. There are a few retired elderly people in the church and no one makes much money...

(Date sent: Wed, 2 Dec 1998 12:15:58 -0600, Subject: prayer)

Several people responded to offering pray for his church that God would bless their efforts and provide the finances. In his interview Peter Stuart said he felt the prayer they received from people all over the world contributed to their eventual success in raising the money. Yet the OLC's support extended beyond prayer. Stuart recounted his surprise in receiving a cheque for 100 dollars from one OLC member towards his church's bill. Several months later the donor was in the Denver area on business and attended church with Stuart, sharing greetings and a song during the testimony time. This, he said, made quite an impression on his church as "everybody got to meet the guy that sent the church \$100 through the Internet".

He came and visited and sang in the church and brought his wife and so everybody in the church was able to meet, you know somebody real. You know, they weren't just, electronic people on the Internet they were real people.¹⁸

This incident demonstrates for Stuart and others how the OLC can be a supplement, adding to the experience of local church. While face-to-face contact is infrequent within the OLC, mostly due to members' physical limitations, it demonstrates the high levels of investment members are willing to make in each other's lives. When one part of the OLC rejoices, they all rejoice.

Can you imagine what I'm doing right now? Bouncing, trying to shout (with little voice) and unable to clap because I'm typing; but my heart is praising and saying all those things I cannot express in words. Thank you, Lord, for your faithfulness in answering our prayers and for providing for this group of your believers.

(Date sent: Tue, 15 Dec 1998 12:30:48 +0000, Subject: Re: Church Update)

Several commented during their interviews that they maintained frequent telephone contact with various OLC members and other Internet contacts. Stuart said the reason was that once people develop a friendship online they often have a desire to get to know them better and

¹⁸ Personal Interview with Peter Stuart, Denver, Colorado (USA) 11 September 1999

telephone interaction provides a fuller picture and enables people to develop a closer friendship. He would consider several of his Internet friends to be close personal friends, due to taking their relationship from online to the phone.

This section has shown that the OLC sees involvement in an online community means demonstrating concern about members' lives beyond the screen. Members provide more than words of support by offering prayer, personal contact via private email or the phone and even in some instances providing material assistance to others. Though many members are bounded by physical limitations they are not limited in the emotional investment and support they try to offer one another. Demonstrating caring behaviour towards members strengthens community investment in each other's lives.

THE ONLINE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY

This next section evaluates how the OLC is unique as a community. First, it is linked to the Internet as Social Network model described in chapter two. Secondly, how the OLC functions as a support network is defined and shapes the community ethos is explored. This narrative demonstrates that sharing in each other's problems brings communal cohesion and ownership of individual crises.

THE ONLINE CHURCH AS A SOCIAL NETWORK

The Social Network model emphasises social, especially communal relationships facilitated by the Internet. Social connections are made as people identify common traits and desires. Individual relationship evolves into communal relational webs. OLC members found commonality in three areas creating these links. First, they identified themselves as Christians speaking openly about their faith and beliefs. Secondly, most active members identified themselves as having physical limitations, such as blindness or hearing loss. Thirdly, members regularly shared their personal struggles, either empathetically relating to other problems or in order to solicit support or prayer. These common traits created the basis for the network of exchanging and receiving support.

The OLC provides a place of social acceptance; members portray it as a haven where they are not judged on the basis of their disabilities. Members are described as sympathetic

Christians who understand the challenges others face. This occurs both through individuals and communal interactions. As Rick Metts stated,

This OLC list is a place of refuge...where I have been nurtured, trimmed and groomed. I have learned to have passions for others, learned how to say prayers...learned to lift up my brothers and sisters in time of needs. In return I get a family, not a fake one, a loving one who accepts me as I am, deaf/blind with faults.¹⁹

Networking is also created and reinforced as members personally connect themselves to other members' situations or problems. OLC discussion threads often appeared like a group counselling session, with members responding to other experiences by sharing personal stories, weaving a communal web of comfort. An example occurred in weeks two and three through a discussion on depression, beginning with a member sharing her personal struggles:

I have something I need to talk about concerning depression and Christianity...I know I'm opening myself up for criticism here, but please be gentle, because I've had some rough goings with people lately and I don't think I can take much more unkind remarks, but I do want your kind help and advice.

(Date sent: Fri, 20 Nov 1998 18:57:28 +0600, Subject: depression)

Her honesty was interpreted as a cry for help and understanding that she seemed unable to find in her offline community. She received the following response from another member:

I want to know if anyone sends you a harsh or unkind message regarding how you feel or anything. That is not what God wants us to do. He wants us to be loving and kind to those who are hurting--And you, my dear Sister in Christ, you are in need of lots and lots of lovings and squeezings. I'll be praying for you... You are a precious loving one, and we all love you dearly.

(Date sent: Fri, 20 Nov 1998 20:18:28 -0600, Subject: Re: depression)

Validating each other's struggles and affirming each member's worth are central in the OLC social network. As members come to rely on this validation, the OLC becomes a network to fall back on when time gets tough. On three occasions during the case study one infrequent poster sent "good night" wishes to the OLC relating to this:

I just want to say good night, and to tell all you guys I LOVE YOU VERY MUCH AND I THANK GOD FOR YOU ALL (EACH OF YOU) YOU ALL ARE SO IMPORTANT TO ME, YOU ALL HELP ME MORE THAN YOU WILL EVER KNOW.

GOOD NIGHT

¹⁹ OLC Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Thu, 11 Feb 1999 16:46:06 -0600, Subject: : Questionnaire

I LOVE YOU ALL

PLEASE DON'T EVER GO AWAY

(Date sent: Thu, 10 Dec 1998 22:33:33 -0500, Subject: Good Night)

Though it seemed she did not know some OLC members intimately or personally, she consistently referred to them as her family and appeared to depend on their fellowship. She stresses this in the emails by frequently using capital letters, equivalent to shouting online, to accentuate the importance she places on the OLC as a cushion of care.

The social network of the OLC is also maintained through members' prayer support of each other. Peter Stuart described the OLC as a good place to receive prayer as he often shares prayer needs online.

I've said things on OLC myself, that I've never felt that I should say in my own church ... It's much easier just to type a message out and send it out to a mailing list than it is to stand up in a church and say pray for me, I'm not doing too well right now.²⁰

Although he later described the OLC as a "poor substitute" for a real church that can intervene face-to-face in the lives of its members, online Christian communities often create spaces where members feel more free to share personal needs and receive ministry. Questionnaire respondents described online prayer as equally effective and meaningful as prayer from a friend or church member (11 of 12 responded "yes" and 1 responded "depends"). Online Christian fellowship is also unique because it is virtually present and accessible 24-hours a day. As Brian Darrington commented,

Unfortunately because of the pressures of society the church has lost its 7-days a week ministry, in a lot of areas. And I think that is where the OLC picks up and largely does a tremendous amount of support work in the middle of the week.²¹

The ease in sending out an email and the ability to stay connected seven days a week are strengths of online community. In the OLC, the Internet is characterised as a dynamic network providing the structure for a caring community. As a social network, online community focuses on providing help and encouragement for its members.

²⁰ Personal Interview with Peter Stuart, Denver, Colorado (USA) 11 September 1999

²¹ Personal Interview with Brian Darrington, Clevedon, England (UK), 24 April 1999

THE ONLINE CHURCH AS A SUPPORT NETWORK

Throughout the case study the OLC took the form of a support group, members giving testimonials of struggles they faced offline and community members rallying around them with affirming or encouraging emails. Support, which typically involves posting positive messages or affirmations, is ingrained in the foundations of the OLC as stated in the introductory email to new subscribers, "Be nice to everybody because everybody is having a tough time".²² This relates to the Pauline description of the church as the body of Christ: where or when one member hurts, they all share the hurt and when one rejoices, all rejoice.²³ The community promotes positive support, with correctional advice and criticism being discouraged.

Functioning as a support network means individual problems become the community's problem. Advice flows freely, even though to an outsider it can appear unbalanced. An example occurred in week one when an OLC member's sister disappeared, having not returned home after work. The member emailed the list explaining the situation "It's a scary thing, and I'd appreciate any prayers or good thoughts".²⁴ Within an hour the group received a post reporting her sister had returned home, having gone clubbing and not bothering to inform her husband of her whereabouts. However, instead of being happy, the member's email expresses resentment toward her sister and family issues accompany this incident, which she shared in detail.

I am really struggling with some deep family of origin issues regarding how my blindness has affected my role in the family... and the fact that despite some very stupid choices and a lot of spiritual immaturity she is treated more as an adult than I am... I'm glad that she was safe, but I am very angry about the way she has treated her family today and for so many years.

(Date sent: Sun, 15 Nov 1998 16:47:36 -0500, Subject: Re: sister is found)

Members rallied around her and offered prayer support and encouragement. Her hurts became the group's hurts, as members made efforts to identify with her feeling and stated that sharing brought her closer to the community. As one member responded,

²² Email sent to OLC new subscribers, From: "L-Soft list server at St. John's University (1.8c)"
LISTSERV@MAELSTROM.STJOHNS.EDU, Subject: Usage guidelines for ECHURCH-L

²³ I Corinthians 12.26

²⁴ Email sent to OLC, Date sent: Sun, 15 Nov 1998 07:05:38 -0500, Subject: need prayers or good thoughts or whatever

Much of what you write is certainly an experience shared by a number of us on the List. SB, there's only one way through it - and through it you shall go - and that is with God! ...Be assured I do understand and you have lots of us out there who care too. It's good to have you with us.

(Date sent: Sun, 15 Nov 1998 23:24:05 +0000, Subject: Re: sister is found)

As the saga unfolded in week two SB provided more history about her family situation and frustrations. She wrote of a fight with her father partially brought on by advice she received from the OLC and her vocalising her feelings. She then apologised for sharing such personal details, yet said it was important for her to inform the OLC about the progress of the situation especially because of the prayer members had given her.

Well, I finally had a bit of a blow-out with my dad this evening... I talked about how I've spent all these years talking to therapists, friends, anyone but the family because the family didn't listen, and how I am no longer willing to talk to substitute family and allow issues to go untouched in the family...I apologize if this is too personal for the list, but I wanted to put it in writing and, most of all, to thank those of you who are praying for my family...

(Date sent: Sun, 15 Nov 1998 23:05:26 -0500, Subject: update on family stuff)

Members once again encouraged and commended her openness in facing the situation. Two members even “congratulated” her for standing up for herself. In affirming her behaviour the OLC also affirms the community as a space where personal information should be shared because members can offer advice and comfort.

This situation prompted others to confess personal struggles with their families, connecting with SB's pain, saying blind persons commonly experience this type of family issue. The content of many posts transformed the OLC into a self-help or encounter group. A cycle was observed of members sharing personal issues, then apologising for sharing and then receiving affirmation from the community for what they shared.

The OLC becomes a resource for members to validate their problems and reactions to personal crises as they heard from individuals in similar situations. The OLC moderator tells SB her family problems are not uncommon for those who are blind, again relating to his personal history and offering a grim view for potential reconciliation.

I don't know how many blind people have told me similar stories and my family has been like that for years even though I left home and got married at 19 years of age. I hate to say it, but they are not likely to change. The problem is not your younger sister nor your parents. It is your blindness that is the root of this situation so don't

feel bad; we, those who are blind, know this type of relationship in the family quite well.

(Date sent: Tue, 17 Nov 1998 16:38:38 -0700, Subject: Re: sister is found)

Responses like this promote the OLC as a place where members will find empathy and understanding, while implying offline relationships with sighted family members or friends will continue to be disappointing.

The question could be asked whether the OLC is overly positive or supportive of members behaviour, especially since they only know selective information provided by the individuals. It is likely that the OLC would counter this arguing that the community is simply displaying Christian love by offering each other “blind love” and acceptance. OLC members are quick to praise one another and say how email input has benefited them, helping sustain the community as a support network.

This section has provided a profile of the OLC narrative of a community characterising itself as a support network. Members rely on the OLC as an advice source and a space to receive encouragement in their daily lives. It has also shown how it fits with the Social Network model by creating a web of acceptance with others who have specific common attributes and beliefs.

THE ONLINE CHURCH'S REFLECTION ON THE CHURCH

In this section the OLC's reflection and response to the real world Church is explored. Focusing on members' comments on experiences with local church provides a critique of the offline Christian community in two areas. First, members' comparison of OLC involvement in relation to the local church is noted, highlighting how its is identified as a supplement, and for some a substitute. Secondly, OLC understanding of the role of the church is investigated through two of Dulles' models outlined in chapter one, the Church as Servant and the Church as Herald.

THE ONLINE CHURCH AS SUPPLEMENT OR SUBSITUTE

A majority of questionnaire respondents (10 of 12) viewed participation in the OLC, as a supplement to local church involvement. Members noted relational support as being the primary area it supplemented, indicating online interaction helped them develop Christian relationships and friendships. These relationships were often described as more dynamic, as

one OLC member active in their church commented, “OLC members know how I feel, because they feel much the same. I do not have a chance to share at this level in my local church”. (BD)

Viewing the OLC as supplemental meant online community was seen as a separate sphere of interaction. The local church was described as where members received teaching and the OLC was where they found Christian friendships and spiritual or emotional input. Online and offline community were linked yet separate. Few (4 of 12) indicated the OLC influenced their local church involvement. Those who did stressed the OLC supplied them with information they could bring to their church or provided another arena to receive prayer. Questionnaire response offered mixed reactions to the supplemental nature of the OLC. Some members depend on the OLC fellowship and support more than others do. This was dependent on members’ current or past church experiences.

Brian Darrington described his OLC friendships as “informal, because he can switch them off at any time” saying he knows people in his local church more intimately and doesn’t feel “the same heavy obligations” for OLC members “though I do care about the people and do pray for them”. He spoke very positively about his church and strongly advocated that Christians need to be in daily contact with other Christians. He spoke of his involvement in the local community throughout the week, “on the Internet, on the OLC...it’s only a few minutes each day”.²⁵ While Darrington is committed to his local church, he understands that is not possible for some OLC members due to physical limitations. He also said some churches do not do a good job of supporting those with special needs.

OLC members with disabilities indicated real world church had not been an easy place to find acceptance. Several offered examples of struggles they faced when attempting to find a church community they felt comfortable in. Three members, in the questionnaire, indicated they were currently not involved in a church. Two others indicated they were not satisfied with their churches due to a lack of support.

Rick Metts described his experiences visiting churches as disappointing. He commented that people he met did not live up to the Christian standards he has read about in Scripture or other religious material. People often interacted awkwardly with him due to his blindness

²⁵ Personal Interview with Brian Darrington, Clevedon, England (UK), 24 April 1999

and hearing problems. For him the OLC functions in the way he believes the church should behave and he uses it to evaluate his real world church experiences.

Anytime I am involved with the church I hardly hear anybody speak like a Christian person would do, like you see on the OLC. People still have the nature to complain or the nature to gossip and I hear that and I see that at church, my wife's church.... When people get together at church, it's pretty much business. Where OLC is more social, but it goes deeper than social, it's just like family. It's really like family.²⁶

Rick describes his online friend as “more real” and faithful than his face-to-face friendships. Other OLC members echoed disappointment with offline church, especially in its ability to relate to deaf-blind persons.

Carla Prasher shared discouraging incidents of attempts to become involved in local churches where she lives in London. Due to their blindness she and her husband have found it difficult to physically locate churches, having to rely on public transportation or rides from others. Living in a multi-cultural area also presents another challenge to integrating into local churches, having to deal with different ethnic backgrounds. Also having two guide dogs has caused problems, as some Church members have been afraid of them.

You've not just got the barrier of introducing yourself to Christians who can see and being on a different playing field to them... all these other barriers put together have made it very difficult to get into a local church and make friends.²⁷

Six years of feeling unaccepted and unable to integrate into a church have left her frustrated. At the time of the interview they had taken time out from church searching, opting for listening to Christian tapes or radio for teaching input. While she stressed the OLC was not a complete substitute for church, it has become a significant part of her Christian support structure. This was highlighted for her, just before the interview, when she decided to take a short break from the list due to an illness and feeling the need for less time online and “more time directly with God”. This hiatus lasted only two weeks as she received numerous emails from OLC members asking her to come back. Several members continually forwarded list messages to her and one OLC friend emailed her everyday. Prasher said this

²⁶ Personal Interview with Rick Metts, Overland, Missouri (USA), 4 September 1999

²⁷ Personal Interview with Carla Prasher, London, England (UK), 26 April 1999

Indicated clearly to me the love and support of my OLC friends... So I think if anything I saw that they weren't going to let me go easy and they still wanted to communicate with me. I kept getting the 'come back' messages.²⁸

This was contrasted by another incident occurring when she and her husband attended a local church for a short time. One Sunday they got lost and were unable to find the church building when they tried to make their own way to church after their ride did not show up. Prasher later learned that several church members passed them on their way to the service and saw them going the wrong way, yet no one stopped them to inquire whether or not they needed help.

For many in the OLC the benefits the OLC provides for members are care, empathy, emotional and spiritual assistance. Although the OLC is identified as a supplement, for some it serves as a substitute due to their non-involvement in a real world church. Others stated real world church does not provide adequate fellowship or support and going online has met this lack. However, it should be noted that OLC members see the church has more roles than just to supply relationships and care. These areas of the church are considered next in light of Dulles' models.

THE ONLINE CHURCH AS HERALD AND SERVANT

An assumption in this thesis is that a community's understanding of the role of the church is imported into online Christian community experiences and beliefs. While practices often need adaptation online, underlying theological beliefs are often very similar. In the OLC the models the Church as Herald and the Church as Servant can be identified as being applied and lived out by community members. Unlike the Community of Prophecy, the OLC can not be neatly linked to one denominational classification. Questionnaire data showed members belong to diverse affiliations, from Catholic to Baptist. Yet the OLC represents similar beliefs about the function of the church relating to these models.

The model, Church as Herald, focuses on church as a congregation gathered around the scriptures. The primary task of church is proclamation of the word of God, specifically the Gospel story of Jesus. Inside the church, the congregation gathers around preaching of the word. Outside the church, members are messengers responsible for sharing the word with

²⁸ Personal Interview with Carla Prasher, London, England (UK), 26 April 1999

others. This model is lived out in evangelical and many mainline Protestant churches, such as the Church of Scotland, who are often characterised as “People of the Book”.

In the OLC this model emerges through the community’s focus on heralding ideas related to scripture. This is demonstrated as members frequently forward online devotional and Bible teachings from other lists to the community. Although the list moderator discourages forwarding, members are often thanked for sharing these teachings with the OLC.

Members also emphasise the importance of Bible study and exposition in their posts. Though Prasher commented that the OLC has never sustained an in-depth Bible study for any extended period, discussions on Bible studies emerged twice during the case study. One instance involved people sharing about their personal Bible studies, which eventually evolved into members exhorting one another to spend more time “in the Word”.

I have a question for every one here. How much time each day would you say that you take for bible studies? I know that some times we don't get to do as much as we should, and then there are times that we let things get in the way of doing what is really more important than anything else that we do when we should be concentrating more on the Lord.

(Date sent: Thu, 10 Dec 1998 13:12:52 -0600,Subject: bible studies.)

Evangelism online and sharing testimonies of God’s influence in members’ lives are also emphasised. Metts stressed the opportunity to share his beliefs was a main motivations for getting online. He even referred to it as “a calling” saying,

I just felt that I needed to be on there. To me this is fellowship. I mean, I notice when I read something out of the Bible I can't stay bottled up with it, I have to spill it out. I have to tell somebody, you know.²⁹

He expressed that sharing one’s testimony and speaking of Christ should be focus of a person’s Christian life both online and offline. While having limited experience in real world churches, he feels the Internet facilitates this more easily and the OLC should advocate online proclamation.

On OLC I see that, on the Internet, there's a lot of places that have Christian web sites and Christian chat rooms and you see that desire to help somebody. In the church I don't see that, at this particular church.³⁰

²⁹ Personal Interview with Rick Metts, Overland, Missouri (USA), 4 September 1999

³⁰ Personal Interview with Rick Metts, Overland, Missouri (USA), 4 September 1999

Members frequently use the OLC as a tool to encourage other believers in their faith. Several also spoke of deliberate involvement in “witnessing” online, especially in chat rooms. For some the OLC creates an “electric church” where the focus is on proclamation. Yet, Church as Herald is not the only model of church at work in the OLC; the Church as Servant is also strongly emphasised.

Dulles’ Church as Servant model has been described as the “church for others”. Focusing on Christ as the suffering servant, church is to be active in service to others by providing help without regard for personal benefit or gain. The church is to serve all humankind, especially for those outwith the Church congregation. The church as a servant community is called to minister in Christ’s name wherever they can identify a need in society. Churches subscribing to liberation theology and those who focus on reconciliation or advocacy on behalf of the marginalised especially seek to live out this model.

The OLC displays a “servant” ethic as they advocate serving the hurting within the community. Several members described their OLC involvement as a ministry. Prasher defined her role in the community as a giver, meeting others’ needs through offering prayer and advice.

I know most people are on the list because, for some reason or other, they need a bit of extra support, a bit of extra sharing. So I am there primarily to encourage. It would be wrong...of me if I felt I was there for my gain. I am not, although I do gain... I am there primarily because of what I hope to give for other people.³¹

Members not only acknowledge needs and prayer requests, but as has been shown, they actively seek out opportunities to encourage others and share in their sufferings though personal email contact. While members are often limited to email encouragement because of physical or geographic barriers, the OLC can be seen as a church of servants, serving one another in the love online to the best of their abilities and resources. Service to others is typically limited to those within the OLC, yet they enthusiastically welcome newcomers into the community. They are often reluctant to let go of members who choose to leave, even for a short time. This was demonstrated when an infrequent poster announced his un-subscription to the list.

³¹ Personal Interview with Carla Prasher, London, England (UK), 26 April 1999

We are sorry your work prevents you from reading all the messages but do understand. May God continue to bless you in whatever you do in His service... We shall miss your contributions. Come Back when you have a chance.

(Date sent: Tue, 24 Nov 1998 13:41:36 +0000, Subject: Re: Update)

The OLC exemplifies the Church as Servant model as it strives to be a servant community, within the limitations of its membership.

This section demonstrated that many members evaluate Church in relation to their experience within the OLC, using it as a benchmark of how the church could or should function in its relationships and care of others. The OLC allows them space to express disappointments and failures of the real world church in its support of people with disabilities and offers an example of how it could better offer empathy and support. Labelling the OLC as a supplement to real world church highlights members' desire for face-to-face contact. Yet actions demonstrate that for some members the OLC functions as a substitute. Analysing the OLC through Dulles' models of herald and servant highlights areas of church life that are important to members. The OLC does well as a servant community, but is lacking as a herald or teaching community. Thus while members emphasise fellowship and support within the OLC, certain aspects of church are not fulfilled online.

SUMMARY

The OLC utilises the Internet as a tool to facilitate the formation of "a loving Christian family". (CB) Members do identify certain limitations of online community, yet primarily describe it as a vibrant and important sphere to build Christian relationships. The OLC portrayed itself as a community functioning as support group to its members. Members joins for fellowship with others who share similar beliefs and can empathise with their physical limitations. While most say online community does not replace the real world Christian fellowship, many expressed disappointments with the Church and described their OLC relationship as more caring and dynamic.

Several characteristics of the OLC can be identified from the data presented. First, the OLC functions as a support network for those who feel their real world friends and families have difficulty relating to them and their challenges because of their disabilities. It provides members a place to receive empathetic Christian support that many have identified as lacking in the real world Church for individuals with disabilities. Online fellowship is important to individuals with physical disabilities. It provides them with a social outlet when

they are limited in their abilities to interact with people in real world settings. They feel freed in their communication as they are judged on the basis of their written words and not on their physical appearance or ability to express themselves verbally. The unique ways members engage with technology related to their sensory impairment and its effects is an issue for possible future analysis.

Secondly, the OLC focuses on providing care and encouragement for members. Email allows individuals to receive frequent and instantaneous responses to their prayer requests and confession of depression or other personal struggles. Emails posted to the entire list directed towards individual members offering positive feedback or advice portray the OLC as striving to affirm its membership as valuable people who are loved and understood. When members were asked to describe what they contributed to the list, over half used descriptors such as offering a helping hand and saw themselves as involved in the OLC to give or receive comfort. This supportive focus was summarised by the respondent from Malta, "It is the kind of group I would call a loving Christian family". (CB)

Thirdly, members consciously try to bridge the gap between online and the offline experience and fellowship. Sharing significant portions of personal details with the OLC does this. Many members send "emails on the side" or even phone other members, trying to extend their friendships. Examples of sending financial and material help between community members were also noted. However, due to geography and physical disabilities most members are prevented from making real world connections with other members.

Fourthly, the OLC was identified as a supplement to real world church involvement. However, through several examples given it could be argued that for some members the OLC is a substitute for the church. What the OLC supplements is a listening ear, understanding based on similar experience and Christian counsel, and an opportunity to serve and support one another. What the OLC lacks is significant Bible teaching, opportunities for proclamation or evangelism, along with opportunity for local involvement in members' lives, aspects of church that members see as important.

This second case study has presented a picture of online Christian community as a space where individuals demonstrate care and concern for one another through their email communication. Examining the OLC demonstrates individuals want to be cared for, valued and supported in their Christian community. Its emphasis on support in the OLC is linked to

many of the members struggling with physical and mental disabilities being limited in their ability to interact in many offline environments. Yet, it also demonstrates that individuals appreciate how the Internet creates a “blind medium”, providing an equal footing for people, no matter their status. This community forces an examination of where the church may be failing in its ability to incorporate the outsider and to provide support. While even OLC members can argue, that fellowship and support are not the only roles of the church, it could be stated that from many members’ experiences that these are roles are lacking. In the next chapter a third online community will be introduced and these issues of fellowship in the online community versus the real world church is explored further.

CHAPTER 7

CASE STUDY THREE: ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter profiles the Anglican Communion Online (AC). The rallying point for the AC is their affinity for and connection to the Anglican Church. As in the previous two case studies the chapter is divided into two parts. First, a brief overview of the AC is given, describing the three phases of research and general findings. Secondly, findings are analysed and presented thematically in four areas. In the “AC and the Online Context”, online community’s emphasis on technological fluency and members’ preference for written over oral communication is examined. In the “AC and the Real World”, how the AC connects online and real world relationships through face-to-face meetings and prayer support is discussed. The “AC as a Community” describes how the community relates to the Internet as a Social Network model. Also its communal narrative is identified as an Anglican network, a community gathered around Anglicanism. “AC Reflection on the Church” demonstrates how AC members see online community as unique yet connected to the global Church. How the AC manifests Dulles’ model of the Church as Sacrament is also described. Finally, a concise summary of key findings of this case study is offered.

OVERVIEW OF THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE

The Anglican Communion Online (AC) is the third case study of this research project. Their informational website describes the email list as a cyberparish where “we pray, we share our joys and sorrows and we openly discuss all aspects of our faith, remembering in many matters people may legitimately hold diverse views”.¹ It has been running for almost a decade in one form or another.

Online discussions range from “scholarly to the casual” and can be categorised under the headings of debate, drivel/humour, and personal reflection. Debate threads can be discussions on contentious issues such as the ordination of women and homosexuality, which emerge in regular cycles, or theological and political discussion highlighting polarised

¹ Website address withheld for privacy purposes.

opinions. The AC values tolerance, allowing members of differing views to respectfully vocalise opposing opinions. Debate threads often take on a life of their own and evolve into other discussions such as in week five when a thread called “It’s the guns!” on school violence launched three other topics.

WOW! This thread shot straight through from ethics and morality of today's public and family through gun-control and abortion right to evolution! Amazing. SIMPLY A-mazing!

(Date: Wed, 23 Jun 1999 10:56:58 -0400, Subject: Evolution of a thread (was: It’s the guns)!)

Debates illustrate the diversity of beliefs and theological perspectives represented in the AC. Members are united by their connection with the Anglican Communion but connection does not equal agreement.

Drivel is the second most common discussion thread, defined by one member as,

The general Anglican rule around this is -- if a note is humorous, a funny take off on an existing thread, etc the standing rule is that you put Drivel somewhere on the subject line. We ended up doing that just for this very reason, folk got confused and it enabled those who didn't like humour to skip it.

(Date: Fri, 4 Jun 1999 20:55:18 -0400, Subject: Re: Is God A Gloomy-Gus?)

Serious posts often evolve into “drivel” or humorous puns, such as the recurring inquiry into “how to un-subscribe”. These posts also illustrate community creativity as they link light-hearted stories to their beliefs. Drivel and humorous threads highlight AC members’ desire to have fun together.

Personal Reflection posts comprise members’ use of the list as a journal or to post online “dear diary” style entries, sharing written pictures of their offline lives. These are not intended to start a discussion or even to solicit comments, rather they appear as attempts by members to offer personal insights with the AC. These can be seriously contemplative such as in week two when a long-time member posted a commentary on returning to his former parish to attend the funeral of a good friend. They can also be playful as when a new member posted an account of dealing with their children’s pets in week five. As a “cyberparish”, the AC not only sustains discussion, but members also provide prayer and share sermons with each other. *Christian Century* described the AC as one of the “best places” to see a community of Christ on the web stating, “you’ll see Christian community—

warts, halos and all—alive and at work”.² The list generates large volumes of post each day, around 75 to 100, which many new subscribers find a bit overwhelming, yet it maintains a fairly consistent membership of between 400 and 500 members. The AC describes itself as a family. Members frequently refer to each other as listsibs, which is short for list-sibling or “brothers and sisters in Christ”. The common trait of AC members is their commitment to the Anglican Communion, while theological and liturgical expressions may differ dramatically.

The AC also goes by the name of St. Sams referring to the lists’ patron saint, Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewski, an American bishop and missionary to China. Schereschewski typed the Bible into Mandarin with one hand, due to physical limitations and is referred to as the “unofficial ‘patron saint’ of those who use a keyboard” by the list. Their community motto is “via media via modem”³ written encircling the top of a crosier staff, which seemingly means that through the Internet they connect and through the church they are a community.

The AC is run by group consensus, the list moderator and owner serves as a technical consultant, not directly monitoring discussion topics. In week four of the case study problems arose when an impatient new subscriber attempted to unsubscribe from the list. The list owner’s response to their inquiry reveals that he leaves the AC to run on its own, trusting members to regulate the community:

I don't follow all the threads, and sometimes I'm travelling for a week or more at a time. I may skim over the topics when I get back. I have a bunch of other lists I'm on that are either work related or trade association related ...I get around 2500 emails a day over eight mailboxes ...I just skim the subjects of 99% of which I read maybe 10%.

(Date: Thu, 17 Jun 1999 18:52:58 -0400, Subject: Re: pleplease (sic) cancel subscription)

Like many email communities the AC is dominated by a core of frequent posters. This group can be identified through a monthly tally generated by one member, ranking members who have posted more than 10 messages each month. Another member tabulates a monthly top-ten poster list and achieving a place on this is often a source of pride for some members. A number of members have been active on the list for five years or more and have

² Michael L. Keene, ‘The Church on the Web’, in *The Christian Century* (20 August 1999) accessed 20 August 1999 <<http://www.christiancentury.org/features.html>> no longer available online

³ “Via Media” relates to John Henry Newman’s writing on the *Via Media* discussing his approach to doctrine and the Anglican Church. Consult: John Henry Newman, *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*, trans. by H.D. Weidner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990)

established a tight bond with each other both online and offline. While the list is not exclusive and readily welcomes new subscribers, it is evident that “old timers” set the behaviour expectations and regulate discussions.

OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDY

The case study involved a six-week period from 30 May to 9 July 1999 utilising the same three-phase research strategy as the previous case studies. Similar to the Online Church, there was a 5-month period of observation as a lurker by the researcher, before the list moderator was contacted about the possibility of including this community in the study. It took two months to identify, contact and receive approval from the list owner for this study. After this, another month was taken to de-lurk and notify list members of the study, as well as preparing a strategy to deal with the projected large numbers of email to be generated during the case study. After the participant-observation phase an email questionnaire was distributed and potential interviewees were selected and contacted. Face-to-face interviews were conducted between two and eight weeks after the participant-observation phase. Another dimension to this phase involved attending a weekend gathering of 36 list sibs in Toronto, Canada in September 1999. In this section a synopsis is given of how each phase of the case study was performed, along with a brief overview of the research data is given.

PHASE 1- PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION RESULTS

Phase one of this case study involved participant-observation in the AC. As in the previous case studies, the aim was to observe the relationships and communication habits within this community. A log of all email posts was kept as well as a research diary of comments during participant-observation. The week before the case study was to begin, a “delurking” message was posted to the list to announce the researcher’s presence and intentions. Response to the researcher’s participation was positive and 17 “welcome” emails were received from the list. Two members commended the approach taken in preparing for the case study, as one email stated:

I'm not one who usually welcomes “newbies” but this time I want to welcome you! It seems to me that you've done everything right, although you've been reading this list long enough to know that not everyone is likely to agree.

1) You took time (a lot of time) to read the list before you jumped in. That's a good start.

2) *You gave a good introduction of yourself. That's always appreciated.*

3) *You are up front in every way about your project. You have permission from the owner of the list; you aren't hiding your purpose from us; you promise to get permission and provide attribution if you wish to cite any of us; and you provide an opportunity for us to get familiar with your work and your concept.*

I think you have an interesting project and I hope we'll be interesting participants, without "playing to the camera" so to speak.

(Date: Tue, 25 May 1999 08:46:56 -0500, Subject: Re: delurking and introduction)

Researcher involvement during the case study was between the status of a "research lurker", as on the Online Church, and active participation as in the Community of Prophecy. The delurking messages were followed by another post two days before the case study began thanking the AC for its welcome and expressing the role of "an active 'virtual' fly on the wall over the next few weeks". At the beginning of week five another message was posted informing new subscribers of the researcher's presence and clarifying the researcher's role, stating, "so you know that I am still here in the silence..."

The AC generated 4670 emails over the 6 weeks of observation, an average of 778 messages per week and over 100 posts a day (excluding the few days in week six in which the list was down due to problems with a hacker). Through the monthly tally of one list member certain statistical figures were available. During the month of June (from the middle of week one through the end of week five) 235 individuals posted emails to the AC, the average being 15 emails per individual. From this group 898 discussion threads were generated, each thread averaging around 14 postings. The top five discussion threads in June 1999 were as follows: *Greek or Hebrew?* —109 posts starting when a seminarian asked the list which language would be more essential for study for the priesthood; *It's the guns!* —68 posts on violence sparked by the Littleton High School shootings in the USA; *Another take on abortion*— 52 posts emerging from the guns discussion; *Stanton on Spong*— 51 posts starting with a list member posting an announcement of the Bishop's birthday that led to a discussion of Spong's theology; and *Trinity Sunday was Evil was Summer Goals and Reading*—49 posts showing how serious topics often devolve into lighter or humorous discussions.

PHASE 2- QUESTIONNAIRE/SURVEY RESULTS

Phase two of this case study involved administering a questionnaire. The first request for volunteers was posted to the list two weeks after the participant-observation period ended. A

relatively small number responded, 29 out of the 236 members who posted to the list over this time period. A second request was sent to the list one week after the initial request, with an additional 20 members volunteering to fill out the questionnaire. Out of these 49 volunteers 38 submitted completed questionnaires.

The questionnaire was similar to the one distributed to the Online Church consisting of three sections of “Background Information”, “Questions Relating to the AC ” and “Questions Relating to Email & Internet Usage”. Changes made to the questionnaire related to the wording of some questions to make them relevant from the OLC to the AC. A copy of this questionnaire can be found in Appendix C.

The majority of the 38 respondents were women (27) with 11 men responding with the average age being 46 years old. About half the individuals were married (18 of the 38), 10 were single, seven divorced, two widowed and one labelled themselves “partnered gay”. Two was the average number of people per household. Members represented a variety of professions, mostly skilled white collar workers such as university lecturers (3), copy writers/editors (3), teachers (3), librarians (3) computer consultants/engineers (3) and those involved in church ministry, banking, nursing and the Military. The majority of AC members live in the USA (30), with Canada (5), the UK (2) and Australia (1) also being represented.

Only three respondents indicated they did not attend Episcopalian or Anglican churches. Most (32 of the 38) identified themselves as being active in the church they attended. Many of them were very involved in specific roles of service in the church such as chalice bearer/lay reader (8), Sunday School teacher (5), vestry member (4) and acting as Rector/Vicar in some capacity (4). The majority of respondents said they had been a member of the AC for two years or more (28) and of these 11 had been a member of the AC for 4 or more years. The average time span for membership was 3 years, showing a high level of commitment and longevity within the AC community. One member who had been part of the AC for over five years put it this way; “I came to debate and stayed because I became part of a community”. (RK) A significant number shared their reason for joining the AC was to have contact with other Anglicans (10 of the 38) and to learn more about the Anglican Communion (6 of 38).

Most learned about the AC by coming across information in a web search or through the recommendation of a friend-acquaintance who had contact with the AC. When asked to

describe their contributions to the list, over half of the respondents used descriptors such as friendly or sporadic. Obtaining a larger view of the Anglican Communion, followed by friendship/fellowship and prayer support, were cited as the primary benefits members received from being a part of the AC. Most described themselves as infrequent posters (25 of the 38) with 10 indicating they were frequent posters and three being lurkers.

Several respondents described the AC as a cyber-coffee hour, similar to the gathering many Anglican churches have after their services, except on a global scale. One member clarified this as: "The AC is a coffee hour on steroids; often contentious and opinionated, but most generally a caring bunch of folks". (EH) Responses to the question "In one sentence describe your experience with the AC" expressed both the joy and frustration many member experience being part of the list, a "family that occasionally has spats but really cares about each other".

PHASE 3- INTERVIEW RESULTS

Phase three involved in-depth face-to-face interviews with four members of the AC, one frequent poster, two infrequent posters and one lurker, all of whom lived in the USA. Interviews were conducted in various settings. Two took place in members' homes which involved meeting other members of family/friends, observation and discussing their Internet usage habits. One of these involved spending a weekend with the member and attending their parish church, the interview being conducted in different parts over two days. Of the other two interviews, one was conducted at the library where the member was employed and the other was held at a coffee shop near the church they worked for. Interviews varied in length from two to five hours.

The first interview was conducted at the conclusion of the participant-observation period in July 1999 and the others in August and September 1999 after the questionnaires had been tallied. The purpose of the third phase interviews was to investigate how AC members integrate their online and offline lives and to verify the impressions they had presented of themselves online. The following are brief profiles of members interviewed, focusing on their motivation for being part of the AC and the benefits they receive from their online community membership.

GAIL BALL

*"Because I'm a member of the ministerial staff where I worship, I need to maintain boundaries around my personal life in front of congregants. On the AC I can be much more vulnerable... it gives me an Anglican community when my work schedule in the local PCUSA congregation precludes substantive involvement."*⁴

The first interview took place in Charlottesville, Virginia with Gail Ball, a 31 year-old Minister of Education at a local Presbyterian Church. She came across the AC during her last semester in seminary and was active on it for three months. She went off the AC after graduating, when her free Internet access ended, yet rejoined again in the summer of 1997 after purchasing her own computer and Internet time. She has been active as a "moderately frequent poster" ever since. Her initial reason for joining in seminary was to interact with Episcopalians and Anglicans while being "in the middle of Presbyterian land". This continues, as she is now part of the paid staff at a Presbyterian Church, yet her personal membership is with the local Episcopal Church.

Gail has found the Internet to be very helpful in enabling her to cope with the tension she finds in her work versus worship area. The AC is where she feels free to be herself and "unabashedly Anglican and where I can learn more about what being Anglican means and what I can be in a community of Anglicans". Being a church staff member she often feels as if she can't relax with others in the congregation she works for, needing to maintain professional boundaries. The AC becomes a place where she can "be a member of a congregation rather than in my pastoral role" which is important to her. She has made a number of close friends through the AC, one of whom she described as "almost a surrogate parent" supporting her when her mother died while she was finishing seminary. Many of these friendships have been strengthened through a closed list she belongs to that is a "spin-off of the AC....made up of folks who have met there, but who want to have a smaller, more tightly knit and trusting community with no limitations of subjects discussed". This group and the AC provide the backbone of her support as a woman in ministry and as an Anglican working in a Presbyterian Church.

⁴ Email sent to AC, Date sent: Mon, 30 Aug 1999 21:14:03 -0400, Subject: Re: AL Questionnaire

MARJIE ASHWORTH

"I've come to see the face of Christ in all the list sibs...even though it's sometimes been difficult to do so."

Marjie Ashworth is 64-year old and has been a member of the AC for over five years. This interview took place at the St Joseph Public Library (Michigan) where she is employed as Library Director. She joined the AC in 1995 after she came across it in a search under "Anglican" while she was learning how to navigate around the WWW.

For her the AC provides a way for people to connect with the Anglican Communion, allowing members to see how different parts of the Church function. She stressed her involvement in the AC was linked to the "faith connection" with other members, being able to fellowship with those who share her beliefs and way of worshipping. "What we share is the same. It's a real core of what we believe in and the church that we love...We share that communion rail."⁵

This faith connection through the AC is "deeper" on some levels than what she has experienced in her real world parish. Though speaking critically about the local parish, Marjie emphasised that she does not identify the AC as a substitute for being involved in the local church. She has been active for many years as a lay reader and chalice bearer in her former diocese in Chicago. Since she had only been in the St Joseph area for a few months, she had not become active in her new parish, though she is a regular attendee and has been asked to get involved in several ministries at the diocesan level.

Due to working more than forty hours a week in her new position she said she was too busy to "relax with the list" just then, though still felt the AC community was important to her especially while she was in a new real world community with few friends. Over the past five years she said she has grown quite comfortable with many of the AC list members saying "we now also pick up the phone and call someone too". The intimacy she describes as experiencing with AC members can be linked to the numerous face-to-face meetings she has had with AC members. She has met at least 75 "listsibs" face-to-face at conventions, organised gatherings and meetings at train stations or airports.

⁵ Personal Interview with Marjie Ashworth, St. Joseph, Michigan (USA), 31 August 1999

JONATHAN ESPIE

“People who are online in a religious community, they all have an encounter with God. You bring that together and it’s gonna be strong and you are going to have that trust because once you’ve been touched by God you’re never the same.”⁶

Jonathan Espie is a 41-year old critical care registered nurse from Blue Springs, Missouri (USA). He was introduced to the Internet about six years ago by a co-worker who was into computers. About two and a half years ago he came across the AC while looking for things on theology and philosophy. He joined to learn about and keep in touch with the greater Anglican Church and has stayed due to friendships he has made on the AC. “If somebody, 600 miles away is going to spend that much time developing a relationship with somebody then I think it’s worthy.”

Internet usage has become part of Jonathan’s lifestyle. He is into a routine of checking his email first thing in the morning after getting off the late shift he works at the hospital and at least twice during the day. His family and most people in his church do not share his enthusiasm. His wife, he said, only uses the computer to balance the family budget and his children use it sporadically to email friends or check out their favourite bands’ websites. When friends at church have visited his website, they often respond “you have got a lot of time on your hands”. They see the computer as something used for entertainment while he sees it as a communication tool.

Jonathan serves on the local vestry and is also pursuing training to become a Deacon in the Episcopal Church. However, in some ways, he sees his interactions in the AC as more vibrant than those in his church. He said, “The AC refreshes me. The vestry gets me down”. This, he says, is due to his personality and his enjoyment of interaction over information. On the AC he describes himself as providing “friendly support” whereas on vestry he is often frustrated by his role as “ vestry meetings can get to be business meetings” which he does not enjoy.

He goes by the tagline “brudder Jonathan” on the AC because, as he explains, “I try to be a brother to all my brothers and sisters” on the AC. For Jonathan the AC extends his church family as he has become close to many members. “And there are people on AC that I would trust with my life, my spiritual life, because I value their opinions.” Through regular phone contact, occasional meetings with members and sharing personal stories online or praying for

⁶ Personal Interview with Jonathan Espie, Blue Springs, Missouri (USA), 6 September 1999

others the AC becomes “a lot like a family”, transforming his online connections into his offline circle of friends.

ANDREA MCPAKE

“What we did in that church this morning is a sacrament...I could not do without that incarnate presence, but this community (the AC) has been very much Jesus for me sometimes. I’ve heard God through this community a lot.”⁷

The final interview took place in Williamsville, New York with Andrea McPake, a newly appointed assistant rector at the local Episcopal Church. The interview included attending worship services where Andrea gave readings and administered communion. Part of the interview also included attending a half-day parish conference for women where Andrea was the afternoon speaker. During her talk she mentioned how the Internet has played a role in her spiritual life, saying “the community online is really of God...it’s part of the body of Christ for me”.

Andrea has been a member of the AC for over three years, joining while in seminary in Connecticut training for the priesthood. She came across AC when browsing the Web and joined being “curious to find out what was happening in the wider church, not just what they were telling me in Divinity School”. The AC added a new dimension to her studies: finding out what other Anglicans were thinking and praying about gave her a “down to earth in the trenches real life” perspective balancing the theoretical discussion she found in lectures.

Soon the AC became a vital part of her life, becoming a “substitute” for her home parish that she had left behind in New York and providing “significant spiritual friendships”. She never found a parish “that filled the bill the way my home parish had” in friendships and style of liturgy while in seminary, so AC met her need for fellowship and support. The AC continues to be important to her but she views it more as a supplement as her current work schedule means she does not have as much time to read or post emails. Now that Andrea works for the church, she is also quick to stress that the online context does not provide a complete “sacramental” context, and for this reason real world “church space” is central in worship. She believes Anglicans should find it important “to be in a space worshipping with people live and in person.”

⁷ Personal Interview with Andrea McPake, Williamsville, New York (USA), 17-18 September 1999

TORONTO LISTMEET

“The AC’s Great Anglican Listmeet” was a face-to-face gathering held from 24 to 26 September 1999 in Toronto, Canada. Plans began in May 1999 when an AC member, a priest in a remote island parish in Quebec, told the list he was coming to Toronto in September and was wondering if any listsibs would be able to meet. Since a number of members live in the Toronto area, the casual meeting soon evolved into a weekend event, the highlight being an AC Community Mass on Saturday evening followed by a formal List dinner at a local restaurant. The group also celebrated Sunday High Mass together at the parish of one of the members, followed by brunch together. Other optional activities, such as tours and shopping expeditions, were planned throughout the weekend. The event was coordinated through a website featuring a schedule and travel information.

The researcher attended the gathering as a participant-observer, being introduced in the Saturday Mass homily as “professional-academic spy”. The intention was to observe and log group interactions, as well as engage individually with members. Notes of conversations were only taken when members gave permission. Thirty-six listsibs attended, the majority being middle-class whites in their mid-40s to mid-50s from North America.

The focus of the weekend was the opportunity to worship and share in the Eucharist together. Strong emotional reactions to this were observed. As the group sang “Shall we Gather at the River” before the gospel reading, one member started off a chain reaction of grabbing the hands of people next to him till the whole group stood in a circle, swaying back and forth, many with eyes closed and in tears. Passing the Peace lasted over 15 minutes and involved exchanging “holy kisses” and hugs.

Members present wanted to share these moments with the greater AC community. Later that evening at a local pub while conversations flitted from theology of the sacraments to vacations and gossip concerning absent listsibs, one member pulled out a laptop. The computer was passed around the tables and a round-robin email post describing the evening’s events was written and sent to the AC. Digital pictures were also taken and later downloaded onto the AC website. The AC’s Great Anglican Listmeet provided a unique opportunity not only to put faces with names, but to observe how online community members attempt to take their relationships offline.

This section provides an overview of research findings explaining how data was collected during the three phases of the case study. The AC is portrayed as an online meeting place for Anglicans where they can explore issues related to the church and build relationships with individuals from a similar tradition. A thematic analysis of the case study data is found in the following sections.

ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE AND THE ONLINE CONTEXT

This section considers how the AC interacts with the online context. An issue investigated is the value members' place on online communication, as members highlighted the ease and adaptability of written communication as important to a significant portion of the community. Online affinity can also be linked to personality styles represented in the AC.

TECHNOLOGICAL FLUENCY IN THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE

Many AC members have a high level of technological expertise. For some this is due to the length of their involvement online and experience in the AC. Questionnaire respondents identified themselves as having a low to intermediate level of technical background. Yet overwhelmingly members claimed they took to new technology easily (33 of the 38). This was also demonstrated in that most members spent an average of 13 hours on email each week. Most respondents had been AC members for an average of three years or more. This amount of time gave many opportunities to acquire advanced skills and knowledge relating to computers and the Internet. In her interview, Gail Ball said church members often came to her for computer help, recognising her fluency in using computers:

Since a lot of the people on the list are fairly high tech sorts of people I've learned about the Internet and it means I'm one of the most technically sound people in my office.⁸

Several list members also work as computer engineers and consultants, including one member involved in the development of email protocol in the 1980s and another who serves on several computer research/regulation boards. Technological fluency means members can become frustrated or annoyed with those who struggle utilising the Internet. This was illustrated on several occasions in members' responses to those who, due to technical problems or lack of technical knowledge, felt "stuck" on the list, unable to unsubscribe.

⁸ Personal Interview with Gail Ball, Charlottesville, Virginia (USA), 6 July 1999

>I have tried repeatedly and at great length to remove myself from your
>otherwise excellent list. <snip>
>Please...don't tell me how to do it *again*...
>Just *stop* it.

The 600+ people you sent this message to CAN'T stop it. Only you or a listowner can remove you. If you have tried both of the proper procedures and neither of them work, then send a polite message to CS explaining your problem. That procedure, as well as the simpler one, is described in your FAQ.

(Date: Wed, 9 Jun 1999 20:49:25 +1000, Subject: Re:
AAAAARRRGHHH!!!)

Helpful advice often digresses into drivel as other list members turn unsubscribing advice into humour or sarcasm, as demonstrated below:

>We're getting into superstition here. The content of the message is not
>relevant. It can be blank.... (snip)
>You could put an entire chapter of the Bible in the body of your message
>and it would work the same as if you had no body of the message.

Which chapter will please Ezmln the most?

(Date: Sun, 13 Jun 1999 00:05:31 -0400, Subject: Re:
removal/erasure/deletion/aka unsubscribing)

Leviticus 13

(Date: Sat, 12 Jun 1999 21:53:04 -0700, Subject: Re:
removal/erasure/deletion/aka unsubscribing)

All this time I thought duct tape was only required for unsubscribing.

(Date: Sun, 13 Jun 1999 17:56:01 +1000, Subject: Re:
removal/erasure/deletion/aka unsubscribing)

Members appear to have certain expectations of technical fluency of those who subscribe to email lists. The community's light-hearted approach to others' frustration can be seen as isolating those who do not belong, because they cannot master certain computer skills or cope with the necessary technological expectations.

PERSONALITY AND LIFESTYLE INFLUENCE HOW ONLINE COMMUNICATION IS VALUED

Why members are drawn to the AC and online communities can be linked to individual communication and personality styles. Several members expressed their preference for written communication over oral. In his interview, Jonathan Espie said he favours writing to conversation, as a way to form and deepen relationships. He values many of his online friendships as much as his face-to-face relationships. This is partly due to his love of letter

writing, stressing contemporary society has lost the “concept of the well written letter”, and email is helping to bring this back. While he would not completely substitute online relationships for face-to-face communication, for him written communication is important in forming relationships.

For somebody to sit down and write something and put some thought into it is so precious... to write five or six sincere paragraphs on the Internet, it takes time. You can't just compose something that quickly and have it mean something to someone... To develop a relationship with someone online like that is really special because you know that the connection is made.⁹

He linked the importance of written communication to the fact that many New Testament books are actually letters, demonstrating how central the written word is to the Church.

Paul...wrote letters to peoples and they were wide spaced and they were diverse. And now 2000 years later you sit at a community, at a computer and you write letters to other people and again it comes back to the word.¹⁰

Espie claims he has felt a power when Christ is manifested in the word, whether it is the “word made flesh” in the scriptures or in emails.

I've seen it. I've felt it. And when you sit down and write to someone and think about these words and read those words and respond to those words, then virtual community is just as much a community as (Paul's) letters were.¹¹

The value placed on written communication also relates to AC members' preferred style of worship. Members express an appreciation for Anglican liturgical worship, primarily based on the written word, reading and repetition. Marjie Ashworth commented that AC members share an affinity with people who enjoy a certain type worship, and appreciation of this style brings unity and a common bond to the community. “There's ...an affinity to a people who appreciate good writing, good liturgy, good music, that have all sorts of things in common.”¹²

Preference for online communication was also attributed to work and lifestyle situations; the Internet is a significant social outlet for some members. Several questionnaire respondents stated their lives would be limited in fellowship without the Internet. One member said he is

⁹ Personal Interview with Jonathan Espie, Blue Springs, Missouri (USA), 6 September 1999

¹⁰ Personal Interview with Jonathan Espie, Blue Springs, Missouri (USA), 6 September 1999

¹¹ Personal Interview with Jonathan Espie, Blue Springs, Missouri (USA), 6 September 1999

¹² Personal Interview with Marjie Ashworth, St. Joseph, Michigan (USA), 31 August 1999

limited in Christian interaction because his wife does not go to church and his work schedule does not allow him much time to interact socially. He said, "I would go crazy very quickly. I am completely dependent on this communication in order to feel socialised". (BR) Another list member explained the AC fulfils her need to meet socially with lots of other people:

I am a raging extrovert married to a raging introvert. My idea of entertaining is that it would be open house at our house all the time. His idea is two other people plus us. The cyberworld has allowed me to have hundreds of people over to our house without making him uncomfortable. I appreciated that—It has helped us stay happily married. (MR)¹³

Personality styles also play a role in determining those who appreciate and thrive in the online environment. The issue of introverts verses extroverts came up several times in various questionnaire responses, interviews and even over the dinner table at the Toronto Listmeet.

Questionnaire responses to "Do you 'talk' or communicate with people differently online compared with 'real life'?" represented an even split with 19 saying "yes" and 18 saying "no". Those who clarified their responses were predominately those who felt they "talked" differently, indicating they were more outgoing and open in their communication online because it was easier for them to communicate in a written form. "Online I can think through and polish what I say, so that I probably communicate better online than in real life," (GH) stated one member. A few commented that many AC members were introverts and for this reason they thrived in an online community. As one member asserted, "I am alternately shy and verbally klutzy, while I swim in writing like a porpoise. (BTW, 75% of AC members turn out to be introverted on the Myers-Briggs scale --introverts tend to prefer writing to talking)." (MW)

This claim, concerning the high number of introverts, could not be verified during the case study yet seemed to be a belief held by many members. During the Toronto Listmeet Saturday evening dinner this claim was raised as several members commented on feeling free being around so many introverts. One self-proclaimed extrovert stood up during dinner and said, "For a bunch of introverts, you guys sure make a lot of noise" which was greeted by laughter. An impromptu hand-count survey revealed about 34 of the 36 present were high "Is" (introverts) on the Myers-Briggs scale. During the meal two individuals also looked

¹³ AC Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Wed, 28 Jul 1999 15:46:30 EDT, Subject: Re: AL Questionnaire

noticeably uncomfortable. One older member kept checking in with them to see how they were holding up, encouraging them that they were “doing good” to be willing to be with the group face-to-face for several hours.

EMAIL AND COMPUTERS FACILITATE CARE AND CONNECTION

Questionnaire respondents predominately characterised the AC as a caring community. To the question of whether people can care for online community members in the same way as an offline community, 21 responded “yes” and 14 responded “depends”. Several indicated that caring was based on the freedom they felt in online communication, as well as feeling accepted by the AC. One “introvert” stated in the questionnaire,

I've found here a place where I can ask questions and share some longings that I've never been able to before...In fact, as I am able to share some of these things in this safe place, I hope I'll eventually feel freer to discuss them face-to-face with other people, especially people at my own church. (SG)¹⁴

Those who felt most comfortable with the online community's ability to facilitate trusting relationships based this on the nature of Internet technology. One member described email communication within the AC as “oddly transparent, letting the soul shine through. There is a matter of being willing to trust the medium -- but if you do, personalities really do shine through”. (MW)

As in previous case studies AC members characterised the computer as a tool (30 out of 38 respondents) to be used for corresponding with people (20 of 37). Yet while describing it as a tool, many emphasised that more than information was exchanged through emails. A few members playfully anthropomorphised their computers, giving them personalities and referring to them as “my little guy” or describing them as a “window on the world”. They were valued for facilitating connections with people. Andrea McPake said her computer becomes part of the stories she reads and writes on the AC; it “becomes a part of those relationships and especially the people I haven't met”. McPake explained she has a “connection” with her computer, like many of her possessions, because it's connected to stories and people she cares about. During her interview she brought out stones, seashells

¹⁴ AC Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Mon, 23 Aug 1999 17:55:08 -0400, Subject: FW: AL Questionnaire

and pieces of furniture that were invaluable to her because of memories associated with them.

My computer has that same kind of connection because it's so much a part of that Anglican community which has been at times so important to me. There is a sort of BOND there. I don't think the computer is alive or anything, but there is a sort of sense of affection...it serves as a connection to other people that I really care about and other emotional experiences.¹⁵

This section illustrates that the AC attracts individuals who feel comfortable and competent using computer technology. Many members also have an affinity with written communication, feeling more confident expressing themselves textually rather than orally. This might be linked to the fact that Anglican liturgy is typically a textually dependent worship style. The online environment provides an important sphere of socialisation for many people due to their lifestyles, which mean they have limited opportunities for fellowship in other contexts. This can also be linked to how individuals relate to their computers, which are viewed as tools connecting them not simply with information but with people and stories.

ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE AND THE REAL WORLD

This section explores ways the AC connects various aspects of members' online and offline lives. First, how AC members consciously bring aspects of their real world experience into online communication is identified. Secondly, how the AC merges online and offline connection through face-to-face interaction is discussed.

ONLINE PRAYER SUPPORT

Prayer is a communal focus on the AC, demonstrating the concern members have for each others' real world lives. Several members, highlighting needs raised in online discussion, compile a weekly prayer request summary. Prayer summaries are written in a liturgical style and posted so members can remember the community's prayer concerns in their personal intercessions. An abbreviated example is as follows:

¹⁵ Personal Interview with Andrea McPake, Williamsville, New York (USA), 17-18 September 1999

Almighty and Everlasting God...

We pray for all who seek to serve you in ordained ministry... and for all who work to clarify God's call: (names of members)...

We rejoice and give you thanks: with our brother, ---, for the birth of his first grandson, that Sr. --- Aunt appears to be cancer free ... we rejoice with those who have completed their seminary training, especially --- and --. As they approach ordination to the diaconate, give your grace to them and to all who are called to any office and ministry for your people... that they may faithfully serve before you to the glory of your great Name and for the benefit of your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Date: Sun, 30 May 1999 19:19:28 -0600, Subject: Prayer Request
Summary: Trinity Sunday, May 30, 1999)

Many questionnaire respondents said prayer support they received from the list was a key benefit of being an AC member. A majority said online prayers were as effective and meaningful as those from a friend or church member (32 of 38 responded "yes" and 4 responded "depends"). Respondents stressed online prayer is no different, as it is dependent on God's intervention and not whether the prayer is said or typed. Others described the benefits of online prayer as, "I believe the Net magnifies the number of people remembering you". (RK) Responses corresponded with comments on prayer support being a part of community life. One member said, "I have on several occasions known the sense of being "held" in prayer by list members--this sense is quite awe-inspiring. Its the sheer scope and numbers of the pray-ers that seem to make the difference." (BW)

Online prayer connects members with each other; some described online prayer support as more vibrant than prayer in their offline experience. Jonathan Espie commented that AC prayer was more meaningful to him than prayers said in his church on a Sunday because the "Prayers of the People" in his parish often focuses on people he doesn't know or have relationship with. On the AC prayer requests involve people he typically has daily contact with and the prayer list is updated weekly.

Close physical community is important, but I don't get the same feeling for prayer that I do when I am with the AC. And I know when at the AC when someone says they'll pray for me, they will... That's a trust because I have seen it happen. Whereas at church someone can say 'oh I'll pray for you' but I don't know that they will.¹⁶

¹⁶ Personal Interview with Jonathan Espie, Blue Springs, Missouri (USA), 6 September 1999

The AC's prayer summary is not only a space for prayer support, but also a way for members to learn about the details of others' offline lives.

LISTMEETS STRENGTHEN OFFLINE CONNECTIONS

Of the three case studies the AC is the most deliberate in pursuing real world meetings with other members. "Listmeets" are regular occurrences for many. They can involve large groups meeting at a specific event or can be small casual gatherings in members' homes. The most legendary list gathering took place in 1997 in Washington DC at the installation of the Presiding Bishop for the American Episcopal Church. Over 40 members attended this ceremony which was followed by a gathering at a member's flat in the DC area. This was the largest listmeet on record; it was a time of food and fellowship with the highlight being a visit by building security when the group was reported to be making too much noise during an impromptu hymn sing.

Many listmeets are tagged onto other Anglican gatherings. Email reports of listmeets include who met whom, where and when they took place, as well as comments on the character of the individuals met. Face-to-face gatherings are valued because the basis of relationship is already established and the conversation can proceed more quickly and easily. One listmeet report commented, "I was also happy to meet JB and to see RF again. At one point I found them in intense conversation. They said it was easier than typing".¹⁷

Descriptions of these events are not simply mini-reports; often they try to draw other list sibs into the event by incorporating personal reflections on the people encountered. Listmeets are frequent and encouraged by members. As one member commented,

And meeting a List-Sib is an amazing experience, because we have so much in common, know so much about each other, and yet...we've just met! What fun! I recommend such meetings to all.

(Date: Sun, 30 May 1999 18:07:02 -0700, Subject: A Most Delightful Meg)

It was joked that online photos are necessary to provide proof of face-to-face meetings. In a medium that thrives on anonymity the AC stresses disclosure and visual artefacts are needed to verify offline meetings of online contacts.

¹⁷ Email sent to AC, Date: Mon, 14 Jun 1999 07:44:26 -0500, Subject: Re: Living the Covenant NAAD/AP Meetings and Listsib Gathering

I may be wrong but I believe that in order for it to be an official AC list party photos are required. CS needs to record the meeting for all to see, no pictures - no party ever happened.

(Date: Mon, 31 May 1999 19:47:44 -0400, Subject: Re: List party! Last call!)

Photographs are frequently placed on the “kiosk” section of the community website, showcasing proof of various members’ gatherings. At the Toronto listmeet members took numerous regular and digital photos, and many later transferred them online. Having proof of meetings may be symptomatic of the desire to recognise and connect with other list members. Online anonymity contributed to several “accidental” listmeets recorded during the case study when AC members found themselves at the same event. One instance was described in week two:

One of my tablemates at Cursillo last weekend was none other than listsib JC, whom I “discovered” when she explained to everyone about her Cyberparish and mentioned with gratitude that folks on the AC were praying for her over the weekend. I asked for her e-signature, told her mine, and said, “I’m one, too” -- and we sat there, just beaming. What a delightful surprise!

(Date: Mon, 7 Jun 1999 13:58:06 EDT, Subject: surprise "listmeet")

Members also spoke of organising holidays specifically around visits with other listsibs. In week two Gail Ball reported plans for an UK holiday scheduled around visiting various British AC members. She emailed the AC her itinerary, saying “My schedule’s fairly booked already, but I might be able to work a cup of tea with another listsib in yet!”¹⁸ She told the list she could be contacted through another member whose home she was staying at for the majority of her time away.

Some members said their real world family and friends had a hard time understanding their commitment to online relationships. One member said her husband referred to the AC as her “imaginary friends”. Andrea McPake said it has been hard for her best friend to understand her spending time online talking and praying with people. She said, “I know my best friend gets jealous of my online girl friends. ‘Cause she says ‘well I’m your best friend’.” McPake explained these close relationships have formed over time, as certain members have become “spiritual soul mates” challenging and encouraging her faith. While her best friend does have email, she is not part of the AC and is not active in a church. “It’s not just as big a part of

¹⁸ Email sent to AC, Date: Sun, 06 Jun 1999 20:35:16 -0400, Subject: off to see the listsibs...(and a few sighs)

her life as it is mine,” explains McPake, so AC relationships meet her need for spiritual input from close friends.

Two other face-to-face meetings are worth spotlighting as they demonstrate that for AC members’ online friendships are seen simply as friendships. AC members attended both celebrations and detailed email reports were posted enabling the celebrations to be communal both online and offline. In week two “The transfiguration of Sister Elisabeth”, as it was described by one listsib, took place when one member took her formal vows as a solitary. After the ceremony the seven AC members in attendance gathered to compose an email describing the event.

We are all sitting in Warren’s office - Sister Elisabeth in a daze...now she wants to say something - and I quote: “I love you all’. Thank you for your prayers. Jesus is the best husband in the world. RW – don’t put that in. (Sorry!) When I get it processed, even minimally, I’ll let you know.”

(Date: Sun, 6 Jun 1999 19:17:12 -0400, Subject: The transfiguration of Sister Elias)

Sister Elisabeth later posted an extensive email to the list reflecting on the ceremony. It was obvious she valued the support of the listsibs present as well as the prayer support of those absent. Several members even participated in the ceremony; one even wrote and performed a song especially for her.

The account of Andrea McPake’s ordination as a Deacon was a highlight in week five. Eight list sibs travelled from Canada and as far away as California to attend the New York event. McPake and other listsibs sent accounts and pictures of the event to the list. Many reported they came not just to attend the ordination, but to join in the celebration as a cyber-family. One member called the event a “metaphysical day” of meeting:

After this hallowed happening, we met all, ALL the listsibs present, it was like a party, meeting for the first time wonderful[sic] humans in the flesh...and fleetingly thought of is this what you all mean about heaven, a meeting place, with a prior knowledge, yet, the new sensation of the touching, the hugging laughter and caring fun. Of course, there were other people, but, the sibs made it for me.

(Date: Sun, 27 Jun 1999 12:04:00 -0400, Subject: The Spiritual dance)

Others said the event filled in the picture they had of McPake and they were celebrating a key moment with a friend who was more than just a “cyber-contact”. A priest from Canada,

and self-proclaimed lurker, wrote that the day had given him a new appreciation for the AC and its members.

Having known Andrea for what seems a long time in cyberspace...having heard of the joys and struggles in her life: My wife and I having prayed so many times for her and for members of her family; and having the knowledge of her prayers for us, it was truly a family experience to share in that service.

(Date: Sun, 27 Jun 1999 18:00:56 -0400 (EDT), Subject: Re: Waiting patiently)

McPake even took a break away from her own party to write an email during the event. While admitting to being in “a bit of the daze” from the day’s activities, it was important to her to share her experiences with the list while they were fresh in her mind. She wrote, “all of you were much in my heart and on my lips today, were part of my ‘communion of saints’.”¹⁹

This section demonstrates that members value opportunities to take relationships beyond the screen and the AC encourages and facilitates this. Relationships are deepened and commitment to the AC is reinforced through face-to-face contact. Members do not see others simply as “those who live in my computer”, as one member playfully put it. They see each other as part of the global church that they have access to through the Internet. Prayer support within the AC keeps members informed about the real world lives of members and encourages emotional -spiritual investment in the community.

ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE AS A COMMUNITY

This section highlights how the AC portrays itself as a community. Two defining characteristics emerged. First, the AC supports the Social Network model described in chapter two. While for some AC members this was because of the discussion generated, more emphasised it was the network of relationships formed with fellow Anglicans that kept them committed. Secondly, the AC is a community gathered around Anglicanism, and their shared expression of faith is central to the group. Therefore the communal narrative can be described as an Anglican Network.

¹⁹ Email sent to AC, Date: Sun, 27 Jun 1999 00:57:56 EDT, Subject: Waiting patiently

ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE AS A SOCIAL NETWORK

Again the Internet as a Social Network model can be applied to the AC as it creates a public place producing social connections. An online social network allows members to receive care and support from others in the network, relating through common experiences and beliefs. Within the AC these connections were often characterised as deeper than those members' experience in their real world communities.

For Andrea McPake the reason for this was the opportunity to publicly share "God Stories" which are "when people write about an experience that they've just had where they really feel God was in it". She feels that by members opening up their spiritual as well as emotional lives online through these stories, a "personal element of caring" about one another grows. McPake began to post her "God stories" while in seminary and received many personal responses from members facilitating "a sense of people really caring about me". She described one instance that occurred while she was doing chaplaincy training at a Hospice. She described it as very stressful, and since it was in the summer she found herself alone much of the time:

I had my heart broken about ten times a week and it was very holy. . . It was my online people I could talk to about that. My best friend (back in NY) didn't really understand it...But online, I could tell people about how holy it was and how important it was and about how heartbreaking it was and people understood. And people would write back and say... 'that's was really wonderful or 'I could see God in that story' or whatever.²⁰

As a seminarian this support was invaluable to her and as she currently trains for the priesthood she still finds online friendship important. Having contact with other AC members for several years and extending these bonds of friendship through personal email, phone conversations and face-to-face meetings meant many members said some of their deepest friendships were founded online.

Many online communities demonstrate high levels of care and concern for their members in need; this is especially true among females. Since members often are limited to online contact they must rely on emails for updates and to offer support. No email response from a member over time is seen as a worrying sign. In week five one concerned AC member desperately tried to contact another without success and finally she emailed the entire list.

²⁰ Personal Interview with Andrea McPake, Williamsville, New York (USA), 17-18 September 1999

This shows many online relationships are not limited to online contact, as the email and response demonstrate:

3 notes (1 public 2 private) and no response -- I'm really worried about you. Just in case you didn't get them I'll recount the main points

1) My mother says she'll drive me over to see you anytime. So just let us know...

2) If you want to speak by phone I'd be happy to talk for a quick or long time...(on private note I gave my #) Please sweetheart let me/us know you are still with us -- Please!

(Date: Sun, 20 Jun 1999 21:54:33 -0400, Subject: Hey!!! Sarge! You there???)

well, i have been making it out - only in the wee hours of the morning (like 2 and 3 a.m.) to the grocery store when there are no crowds or traffic to deal with. i suppose that's a small step.

Thank God for my community here at AC - i don't know what i would do without all of you!

(Date: Tue, 22 Jun 1999 04:05:49, -0500, Subject: agoraphobia - a step in the right direction!)

Being able to connect and demonstrate care is important within the AC. As in the previous case studies, all questionnaire respondents felt their lives would be different in one degree or another if they did not have access to email or the Internet. Many indicated their lives would be "less rich" in relationships, saying that without email they would have less contact with family or friends. The AC was characterised as a good place to develop supportive friendships. One questionnaire respondent explained,

Last fall my husband of 22 years abruptly left. Although I have friends locally, the email community has been a marvellous support. At some particularly difficult moments their prayers and companionship have been a lifeline. (SG)²¹

The ability to be transparent about personal struggles is an important part of sharing in the AC social network. In week two one member AC posted a commentary on returning to his former parish to attend the funeral of a good friend. This post demonstrates the depth of emotion members share online.

It was my first time back in my erstwhile beloved parish in four years or so...To be in that building again with those people -once a source of great strength and

²¹ AC Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Mon, 23 Aug 1999 17:55:08 -0400, Subject: AC Questionnaire

inspiration, later a place of great pain- was very confusing. I said I would never re-enter that place. I did it because Ellie was my choir partner and neighbor and it was she who first brought me there. Thanks for all those who said a prayer. I still don't know what to feel, although it was very clear to me yesterday that the ghost of the former rector is not so present these days.

(Date: Sun, 30 May 1999 15:41:33 -0400, Subject: Ellie's funeral)

His personal reflection is as much about expressing his struggles with church, as it is about grieving for a friend. Many members express openness and vulnerability in their posts.

At the Toronto listmeet many openly said they valued and even to an extent defined themselves by being part of the AC. One member became emotional while expressing this over brunch: "The AC at its best is about recognising God in the group and in each other. What keeps us together is that mystical element, of it being something bigger than ourselves". He said the listmeet had been "one of the highlights of my life" as the AC assisted him in identifying God in others. The AC aided him in living out his Christian commitment. The AC is seen as a community that members can trust for understanding because of their shared Anglican connection and they often have been members for an extended time.

ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE AS AN ANGLICAN NETWORK

While some online communities gather around a single discussion topic the AC rallies around their common bond with the Anglican Communion. Marjie Ashworth described this Anglican connection as "a real core of what we believe in and the church that we love". In her opinion the AC connects members with the Anglican Communion, helping people understand how different parts of the Church function. The AC, she insisted, can help people "who don't understand church structure at all. It's a wonderful way to begin to understand how the parts and pieces of the church fit together".

The AC can be described as an Anglican Network. While a few members are Catholics or are from Orthodox backgrounds, the overwhelming majority of AC members attend Anglican churches. Members are quite committed to their local church, with 32 of the 38 questionnaire respondents indicating they were actively involved in their local parish with a large number being chalice bearers, lay readers or Sunday School teachers (13). A number of AC members are also clergy or hold church leadership roles. For most members the AC complements or is identified as a "supplement" to their local church; 26 out of 38 questionnaire respondents confirmed this. One member used the phrase "companion parish"

to describe the AC's role as it enabled them to connect with the real world Church online. Several cited connections with the Anglican Communion as an important addition the Internet had brought to their lives stressing they would "know less what others think, and have less information about the church" (TR) if it weren't for their membership in the AC.

As an Anglican Network the AC becomes a bridge to the Anglican Church. Gail Ball said in her interview that while she works for a Presbyterian Church, she prefers to worship at a local Episcopalian church when she has opportunity. For her the AC is "a kind of pseudo worshipping community" where she feels "interconnected sacramentally" to other members and the Anglican Communion.²² Being able to fellowship with those who enjoy a similar worship style and staying informed about news and church happenings "really does help me maintain my sort of Anglican identity".²³ Thus for her and other AC members the AC brings connection in their spiritual lives of worship.

Commitment to Anglican worship and liturgy also came up in drivel postings. One example occurred in a week one thread about Trinity Sunday, where a member shared how her local parish serves Neapolitan ice cream²⁴ sundaes in honour of the day. This started a discussion on the potential heresy of using three separate flavours. After numerous posts the verdict was that three separate scoops of ice cream would be comparable to polytheism or "Poly-icecreamism".²⁵ Threads like these show members take their links with Anglicanism seriously, and not so seriously, as it focuses online discussions as well as their offline choice of worship style.

The AC also enjoys debating and grappling with Anglican theology and church politics. Members' theological perspectives are as diverse as the personalities on the list. During week this diversity was illustrated through a discussion on the inerrancy of scripture. One member responded in shock that another took the story of the fall in Genesis literally, commenting "Holy Moses! I do so hope we are beyond believing in the inerrancy of the

²² According to the Church of England Web site, the basic tenets of Anglicanism are: a view of the OT and NT 'as containing all things necessary for salvation', the Apostles creed and the Nicene creed as sufficient statements for Christian faith, the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper and the historic episcopate as the means for administering the Church. *Church of England: What it means to be an Anglican*. 6 September 2001. <<http://www.anglican.org/about/means.html>>

²³ Personal Interview with Gail Ball, Charlottesville, Virginia (USA), 6 July 1999

²⁴ Neapolitan ice cream is chocolate, strawberry, and vanilla ice creams combined in equal portions in one container.

²⁵ Email sent to AC, Date: Mon, 31 May 1999 10:32:23 -0400, Subject: RE: Heresy!

Bible". Several members responded that diversity opinions on Church-related issues was a trademark of the AC:

Welcome to AC! This is precisely the issue in most of the posts. We all read our Bible differently, as though we each had on a different pair of glasses. Further, we all have glasses that differ from those of the early Church Fathers, the Protestants of the Reformation, those of the present church Earldom in the AC Parish. I don't like the idea of Cafeteria Christianity, but when I am really honest with myself, I recognise that it is unavoidable. And all the nit-picking and word-slinging on AC helps me discern that Truth.

(Date: Mon, 31 May 1999 14:00:45 -0700, Subject: Re: Natural Sex--Was: For Meg)

The AC values people who can clearly articulate their convictions and substantiate their arguments. While members hold similar desires for shared conversation on Anglican topics, they often join with different agendas. In order to maintain a civil atmosphere tolerance is stressed by the list. Several members articulated that tolerance is a core value for Anglicans. Ashworth said,

The Anglican Communion is bigger than we are and...if you are an Anglican who is going to be unhappy because somebody disagrees with you someplace or holds to something you don't want to hold the Anglican Church is probably the wrong place for you anyway. Because it just isn't a church where everybody agrees and I guess if you find that out online it's a healthy thing.²⁶

Interaction on the AC was not always friendly, it could be heated and hostile. During the participant-observation phase a set of "rules" emerged to cope with emotional debates, such as abortion. Loosely evolving from *Robert's Rules of Order* they are unique to the AC. The "Jones rule" was used to close threads on issues of misquotation. The "Hitler rule" was used to end a discussion that had turned nasty or when quoting un-truths, clarified by one member as, "If one is going to tell a lie, tell a big one."²⁷ Also the "Milosevic rule" emerged, to end discussions when logic or argumentation used proved morally or ethically questionable.²⁸ Rules were used to intervene in discussions which had become shouting matches between members. They also provided social stability by redirecting discussion back to more relational-neutral topics.

²⁶ Personal Interview with Marjie Ashworth, St. Joseph, Michigan (USA), 31 August 1999

²⁷ Email sent to AC, Date: Thu, 24 Jun 1999 00:30:47 -0500, Subject: Re: P.S. Stanton on Spong

²⁸ This rule relates to Milosevic's questionable stance on justifying ethnic cleansing. An example of how rules are invoked is found in the following email on the AC. "HITLER HITLER HITLER HITLER HITLER- there! That ought to do it!" (Date: Wed, 30 Jun 1999 07:41:01 -0400, Subject: Re: Aborting the abortion thread)

Some members become frustrated by these cycles of debate, while others thrive on them. When harassed members send posts trying to terminate a debate often someone will respond, "If you don't like it, DELETE!" Diversity of belief is both tolerated and supported by the community. The AC's connection with the real world Anglican Communion provides social cement that keeps the community together. While members join with different agendas, most stay because they develop personal relationships with others and deeper understanding of the Anglican Church. The AC is committed to each other through their shared faith and allegiance to Anglicanism.

ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE'S REFLECTION ON THE CHURCH

This section explores how the AC characterises and interacts with real world church. Comments highlighting a member's description or reflection on the AC as it compares to their local church and the Global Anglican Communion are noted. Also, examining the actions and inferences made by members provides a critique of their expectations about Church relationships. While members say the AC serves as a bridge to the larger church, some go on to clarify how the AC facilitates stronger relationships than they experience offline. These claims are examined along with how the AC relates to Dulles' model of the *Church as Sacrament*.

THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE AS PART OF THE FAMILY OF GOD

It has been noted that the majority of members identify participation in the AC as supplemental to involvement in a local parish. As in other case studies respondents stated online Christian community was a supplement in the area of relationships. The AC has also been described as a bridge between the local and global church. Members emphasise the Church is the focal point for Christian community and the AC is simply one expression of this. This was illustrated in a week three discussion as the Church was described as "the family" and the AC as simply being one expression of that family. "This Anglican Church of ours is getting more and more like one big family. You don't suppose this list could have anything to do with it, do you?"²⁹ The family image was used several times to explain how the Church encompasses the AC.

²⁹ Email sent to AC, Date: Sun, 13 Jun 1999 19:50:50 -0700, Subject: post from rich woman

Many members articulated the AC's purpose as being to strengthen links with the larger Christian community outside the local church, which shares their particular values and worship style. Marjie Ashworth said the AC has taught her that the Anglican faith community, "is much larger than I would have thought it was. I am not sure I would have stopped and thought about it, but I would have felt more alone".³⁰ Yet while the AC can bring awareness of the breadth and diversity of the Anglican Communion, it can also stir up discontent concerning aspects not experienced locally.

For some the AC is a place of deeper fellowship than they experience in their local parish. In the questionnaire several indicated they felt greater freedom in the AC because they were involved in church leadership and could not be as open in their home parishes as online. Others commented that the AC diversity and commitment to church-related discussion created deeper levels of dialogue than that taking place in their local parishes. One active church member commented,

The list enables me to engage in levels of thinking and listening that aren't possible in parish life. The topics are often not of the sort one finds in parish gatherings and of course there's no clergyman leading the discussion! (BW)³¹

Several members echoed this, as another said, "I know more about many of the people on AC than I do members of my parish". (JC)

The depth of AC relationships was explained in that online community involves dialogue at a level many find hard to facilitate in offline parishes. Ashworth, who advocates commitment to the local church, did concede, "It takes a very, very long time in a parish face-to-face to talk with people about the kinds of things we talk with each other instantly about online". The local parish, she said, presents barriers to deep conversation. Until someone participates in church ministry or attends numerous adult education groups there is little opportunity to discuss personal issues of faith and theology.

This group (the AC) care a great deal about theology, talk a lot about their religion or their faith. In a parish you may have a handful of those people, but those people will not have worshipped in a thousand different churches, in different countries...

³⁰ Personal Interview with Marjie Ashworth, St. Joseph, Michigan (USA), 31 August 1999

³¹ AC Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Wed, 28 Jul 1999 17:49:49 -0400, Subject: Re: AL Questionnaire

*You don't get to know people in a parish (at this level), so it is much easier to become part of the AC community than it is to become a member of a parish.*³²

The AC's atmosphere was described as a "global coffee hour" highlighting the value placed on conversation and interaction.

High levels of trust are articulated on the AC, attributed to the commitment of many members. Face-to-face meetings strengthen investment in each others' lives. Also members' experience of disappointment with real world church have encouraged them to go online in search of Christians they feel they can trust. One questionnaire respondent stated, "I have to say that I do not find a lot of honesty and trust in my present in-the-flesh congregation. I guess some of my online searching for community goes towards compensating for this lack". (LM) On the AC self-disclosure is treated with respect; while for some members the local parish is not seen as a safe place to be transparent.

In the questionnaire three members indicated the AC was their primary faith community, for various reasons. Two emphasised they had been damaged by the church and were not yet healed or ready to re-invest themselves in a local parish. The AC provided a safe way to stay connected to the Anglican Communion. Although the AC provides aspects of community articulated as lacking in real world parishes, it cannot substitute for certain aspects of a worshipping community that are valued by many members.

ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE AS SACRAMENT

The AC's link to the Anglican Communion means it can be most closely associated with Dulles' *Church as Sacrament* model. This model depicts the church as a symbolic community emphasising corporate participation in sacramental acts. Sacraments are acts, such as Baptism or the Eucharist, meant to represent Christ's active presence within the church.³³ These symbols are not merely solitary acts; they take place in a communal context. The *Church as Sacrament* transforms rituals and symbols into "events of grace" in which God is present. By sharing together members are communally transformed. Focus, in this model, is placed on external acts of community worship, which give meaning to the community and individuals.

³² Personal Interview with Marjie Ashworth, St. Joseph, Michigan (USA), 31 August 1999

³³ Dulles, p 62.

AC members say that online community meets needs for discussion of personal or spiritual issues and enlarges the experiences with others and the Church. Yet they do not see online involvement as a suitable substitute for the worship experience. A focus of Anglo-Catholic liturgical worship is the Eucharist; through the bread and wine Christ is understood to be present with the congregation. While members said they experienced Christ through fellowshiping with the AC, many were adamant this was not a complete experience of worship for them.

As an Episcopal Church Deacon Andrea McPake stressed the online context does not provide a complete “sacramental” context; worship in a real world “church space” must be central. Attempts have been made to incorporate the sacrament online. She explained how during the 1997 Presiding Bishop’s installation in America there was a computer up-link site available for those who wanted to watch via the Internet. Arrangements were also made for people to celebrate the Eucharist at home at the same time it was being celebrated in the cathedral. Yet as far as she was concerned this was not a “real Eucharist” because, “if there is not someone who is ordained there laying their hands on those elements they are not consecrated”. McPake believes it should be important for Anglicans “to be in a space worshipping with people live and in person.”

The sacrament of communion emerged as a theme in several online discussions. A central thread in weeks three and four concerned whether Lay Eucharist Ministers (LEMs), delivering communion to housebound parishioners, should partake of communion with the recipient or not. Extensive debate on how communion should be served along with personal stories of sharing communion or serving as a LEM emerged. The presence of such discussion illustrates AC upholds a specific theological context and religious tradition. Even a drivel thread, deriving from a passing comment about Anne Rice’s novels, brought forth a discussion of “vampire theology” evolving into a serious discussion of theological ideas associated with the symbols of the body and the blood.

Members also spoke openly about the centrality of the Eucharist in their faith and worship. One member confessing they had missed Mass for the first time that year stated:

That led me to thinking about my previous denominational affiliation where we only celebrated our hyper-Zwinglian “Communion” service four times a year. We were told over & over again how the awful Papists had ruined the deep significance & meaning of Communion by “doing it” every week. Poppycock, I say. I find myself

joyfully racing toward my parish church each Sunday, my heart literally singing at the thought of "doing it all again."

(Date: Sat, 19 Jun 1999 15:01:48 EDT, Subject: Missing A Sunday & the Big Lie)

The value placed on sacramental worship means that for many the AC remains limited as a community. A questionnaire respondent affirmed this saying the AC had been valuable for her self-esteem since she was judged by "the ideas I put in print" and not her clothes or mannerisms. Yet she said the AC remained supplemental because, "I can't share Communion with the List, and I can only very rarely hug them". (GH) For this reason Mass was the central activity of the "Great Toronto Listmeet". The official AC Community Eucharist program echoed this,

This 'listmeet' in Toronto is an opportunity for many to celebrate together face-to-face, but in our hearts, in our prayers, and over the electrons, our beloved community worldwide celebrates this holy meal with us.³⁴

The Eucharist service brought together the variety of worship styles and liturgical backgrounds of those present. Organisers spent significant time beforehand as email attendees attempting to incorporate personal requests into the service; 12 members took lay and pastoral roles in the service. As the bread and the wine were shared, the officiating priest emphasised the AC was being transformed in the act of sharing together into one body. Physical presence and physically partaking of communion together was interpreted as connecting those present.

Members described the dinner following Mass as a "holy meal" or fellowship feast. In accounts of other listmeets, sharing a meal with other members and breaking bread was compared to or seen as an extension of communion.

It truly gives me a sense of the body of Christ being more than just the church in my little corner of the world to sit and break bread with people who did not know my face but who came to find me when I was lost, opened their home to me, fed me, and delivered me safely back to my hotel.

(Date: Thu, 17 Jun 1999 02:40:14 EDT, Subject: Re: listmeet)

Dulles' model of the *Church as Sacrament* focuses on sharing in a communal symbolic ritual. The sacrament of communion, in various expressions, is used to unite the AC to the

³⁴ Written in the introduction to the Order of Service in a bulletin specially prepared for the Great Toronto Listmeet Saturday Evening Mass.

Anglican Communion. The primacy of the Eucharist celebration means the AC can never be seen as a complete substitute worshipping community for AC members.

This section demonstrates AC is seen as a part of the larger “family of God” by its members, being linked to the global Anglican Communion, and serves as one of many expressions of the Church in the world today. The AC relates to Church as Sacrament, by emphasising the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, as does the Anglican Church. AC members also place high value on the embodied gathering and communal sharing of the Eucharist with others. They value the ability to fellowship, learn about Anglicanism and the beliefs of their brothers and sisters in the faith online, but worship without physical presence is seen as incomplete.

SUMMARY

The Anglican Communion Online characterised itself as a “global coffee hour”, the community focuses on discussion and building relationships related to the Anglican Church. Many of its members are technologically proficient, prefer written over oral communication and describe themselves as introverts. According to the questionnaire results, AC members are predominantly professional, white-collar workers, demonstrating a higher level of education and intellectual interests than the other two online communities, affecting the type and depths of discussions. Anglicanism is the primary influence on members’ discussions topics, theological views and practices both online and offline.

The Anglican Communion Online is a community first committed to Anglicanism and then fellowship in an online environment. From the data presented several noteworthy observations can be made. First, the AC has consciously tried to create the atmosphere of a cyberparish, as broad as the Anglican Communion itself. By referring to members as “listsibs”, brother and sisters in Christ, they invoke the image of family. Yet, compared to the previous two case studies, members display much more candour in their posts. Responses are often openly argumentative, sarcastic and even rude especially in conjunction to debates. They also frequently employ playful language or teasing when addressing each other. This presents a dichotomy between a relaxed and volatile atmosphere. Members are free to argue and debate like real world brothers and sisters, yet they also stick up for one another. There is an understanding that listsibs can tease and challenge each other, but outsiders are not allowed to. Discussions are guided by their particular faith tradition, while representing the diversity of the Anglican Communion.

Secondly, the majority of members are active in their local parishes, many being ministers or lay leaders. They speak freely online about their church experiences and their perceptions of the Church on larger levels. They openly share personal situations, especially times of rejoicing (births and weddings) and times of pain (sickness and deaths) which often become part of the community prayers. Openness allows members to connect to individuals and link their local experiences with the wider Church. The AC emphasises face-to-face interaction with its members. Listmeets focus on connecting not just with friends, but with family in the Anglican Communion. Fellowship meals are often the focus of listmeets; breaking bread for fellowship is seen as a sacramental connection. The AC, however, cannot provide complete sacramental worship through the Eucharist. Thus, involvement in the local church is important for members.

Thirdly, the AC serves as an online manifestation and extension of the Anglican Church, seemingly a cyberparish in a real world diocesan system. Many people use the AC to establish, clarify or even cement their identity as Anglicans and Episcopalians. It helps them get to know others who are part of the communion as the AC enriches the social dimension of church life. People care for their “cyber-friends” as brothers and sisters in Christ and not simply as online contacts. The AC as a cyberparish is valued as a place where they can meet individuals committed to their faith from different parts of the world and from different experiences within their same chosen Christian tradition. The Internet provides a common ground for gathering and a space to take relationships deeper. While the AC is good at facilitating relationships, it lacks the ability to fulfil the need to have embodied experience of worship and fellowship.

This third case study highlights people’s desire to be part of something larger than their local church, they desire connection with like-minded worshippers from a similar tradition for fellowship and partnership. The AC highlights how individuals transfer and adapt their denominationally focused belief online. While members described the AC as a valuable sphere for connections with other Anglicans, most recognised that it does not provide embodied sacramental worship. Therefore, it is labeled as a supplement to local parish involvement. For those in certain sacramental traditions, online Christian community will always be limited in its worship experience, yet limitless in the connections it can provide with other believers.

CHAPTER 8

WE ARE ONE IN THE NETWORK: CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

Conclusions in this thesis were formed through engaging with hundreds of online Christian community members. Many of their observations and assessments stated in emails, questionnaires and interviews were startling and poignant. Some of these comments affirmed the perceived validity and importance of online experience.

I am a raging extrovert married to a raging introvert...The cyberworld has allowed me to have hundreds of people over to our house without making (my husband) uncomfortable. I appreciated that—It has helped us stay happily married.

(AC Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Wed, 28 Jul 1999 15:46:30 EDT, Subject: Re: AC Questionnaire)

Other remarks offered questioning or unfavourable responses towards offline church experiences.

I think OLC's strength and why a lot of blind Christians go to OLC is that there is there a community who not only cares but understands what blind Christians in particular are going through...I don't know that a local church could do any better.

(Personal Interview with Carla Prasher, OLC)

Quotes such as this issue a call for serious reflection on how online community influences and challenges the Church. Most discussions of online community have involved advocates emphasising that online community will reinvigorate a lost sense of community in modern society or critics arguing it is encouraging people to withdraw from real world community. This thesis has sought to approach online community as a new form of community having both positive and negative implications. Therefore, the task has been to address how does the presence of online community and the discussions surrounding it shapes the community debate or re-defines community.

The concept of a disembodied community is problematic for many theologians, church workers and lay people. To consider a faceless group of individuals who connect through computer terminals and telephone wires and not through physical presence is troubling to those who hold fast to ideas of church being linked to a building with face-to-face

interaction. However, the purpose of this thesis is not to debate to whether a group of people who meet via the Internet can be considered a “community” or a “church”. The fact is that online communities exist, and what needs to be investigated is how these groups define themselves and function. The important question has not been, Can an online group be a “community”? Rather, what kind community does it represent?

In this thesis, theological definitions of community were brought together with a Social Network Analysis of community. The result was community defined as a network of relationships between individuals connecting to a common purpose, whose bonds are created and sustained through shared traits and beliefs. The Internet, the “network of all connected networks”, was described as more than a communication tool used to connect to computer networks. Cyberspace, a metaphorical space behind the computer screen, was described as laden with distinct interpretations of what is real and what is virtual in a technological world. Together the Internet and cyberspace can be seen as a reality laboratory, a place used to explore new ways of communicating and being. Online community combines traditional traits of community with a new technological setting. An online community is defined as a group of individuals who assemble through Internet technology and form a network of interdependent relationships based on a common focus, care and communication. These definitions served as groundwork for studying online Christian communities who have a common Christian commitment, focus their interaction on specific faith-based discussion topics and unite around a shared story.

The task of this thesis has been to tell the story of community, while considering the overarching narrative of community and identifying the individual community stories of three online Christian communities. In chapter one, Hauerwas’s perspective that Christians are in essence a “storied people” was presented. He identified Christian community as a community “forming people with virtues to witness to God’s truth in the world”.¹ The integrity of the story binds the community together, as individuals align themselves with the communal narrative. Members gather around a common focus and establish connection with other members and the group through the community’s narrative. Members must have a certain level of agreement with the interpretation of the story in order to build relationships and consolidate the community. When individuals fail to live by the story framework their

¹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, p. 3.

relationship with the group dissolves. The story brings unity and meaning to the community members.

The ability of ethnographic case studies to describe the communal relationship of storied people was demonstrated in chapters five, six and seven. Participation in these online communities served as a bridge for members to certain aspects from which they felt disconnected in their offline lives. Community of Prophecy (CP) members were cut off from what they saw as prophetic input and engagement.² Online Church (OLC) members were isolated from people due to their sensory impairments.³ Anglican Communion Online (AC) members were disconnected from people and information related to the wider Anglican Church.⁴ Whether it was teaching, input from others or fellowship with those who share common beliefs, each group involved the pursuit of relationships. Members' common goals and pursuits drew them towards the Internet and online involvement, which facilitates the creation of storied relational networks. From this study it is argued that community is essentially about relationship; it is a story about networks of relationships. This theme is clarified and expounded upon in these conclusions.

In this chapter a summary of the case study findings is presented. This is followed by an analysis of the key themes emerging from the case study data. Next, five attributes of community are highlighted helping to construct a new way of understanding community, community as relationship. Finally, community as relationship is defined and explained.

SUMMARY OF CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Data from each case study were analysed and presented under four themes. First, *The Online Community and the Online Context* theme examined how each community used Internet technology and adapted to the online environment. Email encourages brief, direct and frequent communication. Online community members felt email brought a new freedom to their communication through allowing more time for reflection than face-to-face interaction and providing access to greater numbers of social contacts. Those who described themselves as introverts and felt more comfortable with written over oral communication preferred

² Consult comments made in Chapter 5 in sections "The Community of Prophecy as a Spiritual Network" pp. 165-168 and "Strengths of Online Community" pp. 169-170.

³ Consult comments made in Chapter 6 in section "The Online Church as Support Network" pp. 202-204.

⁴ Consult comments made in Chapter 7 in Gail Ball's interview synopsis pp. 220-221 and the section "Anglican Communion Online as Anglican Network" pp. 238-241.

online communication. Others appreciated not being judged on the basis of their physical appearance or ability to communicate orally. Yet, this freedom and the technology's lack of visual, non-verbal boundaries also elicited anti-social online behaviour in some communities such as spamming, flaming and rude or confrontational exchanges. Overall, while members appreciated the benefits of email, they voiced a longing for more personal expression than the Internet allows. Attempts to bridge the non-verbal gap were made through the use of emoticons, cyber-hugs and sharing personal information in emails.⁵

Secondly, *The Online Community and the Real World* theme investigated how each community links online experiences with real world activities. Online engagement, reading and posting emails, is a fixed part of many members, daily routines. Several demonstrated great commitment to their communities in the efforts they made to maintain online contact when they were away from home or travelling. Members in each community expressed the craving to reach beyond the screen for more intimate contact with their online friends; the result was that many exchanged personal emails, established contact via phone and even arranged face-to-face meetings with members. Sharing personal details about individuals' offline lives was encouraged; describing real world needs through prayer requests also fostered members' concern and knowledge of each others' lives. Real world needs shared online resulted not only in prayer support or encouragement. In a few instances members sent financial and material support to others. As well as bringing offline information into online conversations, members also brought online information to their real world churches. Examples were noted of members sharing prayer requests and teaching material with their local churches. Online community involvement extended members' spheres of influence and opportunities for ministry.

Thirdly, *The Online Community as a Community* theme explored how each online group develops unique patterns of behaviour and a common identity. An overarching narrative was identified for all three communities, relating to the Internet models in chapter two. All three exemplified "The Internet as Social Network" where the Internet is conceived of as a social space and making connections with people is the primary goal. These communities were shown to be communal networks encouraging members to emotionally invest in forming online relationships. While the Community of Prophecy gathers as a learning community around the topic of prophecy, a key concern for the leadership core is how members treat and

⁵ Consult comments made in Chapter 5 pp. 157-158 and Chapter 6 pp.193-195.

interact with each other in this pursuit. By stressing prophetic character issues and maintaining the community as a “family” and a “safe place” to learn, relationships are emphasised above the pursuit of knowledge. The Online Church presents itself as a supportive community, a “place of refuge”, with the main role of members being to encourage and nurture one another. The community is a dynamic network focused on offering and receiving guidance from each other. Value judgements are avoided in exchanges; posts are to be of a positive, supportive nature. The Anglican Communion Online gathers for dialogue and debate on issues related to the Anglican Church, seeking not simply to connect with the larger institution of the Church, but with its membership. Community members’ convictions are diverse and often seemingly in conflict, yet their desire to engage with others of similar experiences and beliefs motivates them to tolerate differences in order to build relationships. The craving for connection to “something bigger than ourselves” creates investment in the community by its members.

Each online community also possessed a unique narrative used to bring cohesion and identity to the community. As members identify with the narrative, they find a communal purpose and sense of worth, shaping conceptions of the group and their role in it. The Community of Prophecy as a Spiritual Network presents this online community as designed and initiated by God for a specific purpose. Members are characterised as “pioneers” on a divine mission and the community as having potential to influence the offline world as well as the online setting in this quest. They are also a community involved in “warfare” against an enemy seeking to sabotage the community potential and destiny through computer problems. The spiritual network narrative empowers members to understand their community as possessing power from God to influence the global Christian community. The Online Church as a Support Network portrays the community as a support group where individuals’ problems become the community’s problem. The community creates a supportive atmosphere by emphasising transparency and disclosure. Many members have common physical and visual limitations. Members are encouraged to discuss these struggles with the community, implying they will find empathy and understanding online which they may feel is lacking from offline friends and family. The support network narrative allows members to see this community as a place offering “blind love” and acceptance to those coming from similar experiences, providing care for members in ways unavailable to them offline. The Anglican Communion Online as an Anglican network is a narrative demonstrating members’ commitment to the beliefs and practices of the Anglican Church. This community is identified as a microcosm of the larger Anglican Communion. Members often join the community to gain understanding of the

Anglican Church and stay because of the relationships they form with others who share their allegiance to Anglicanism. The Anglican network narrative enables individuals to see their online involvement as an opportunity to be “interconnected sacramentally” with others from the Anglican tradition.

Fourthly, *The Online Community Reflects on the Church* theme illustrated how members critique the real world church community through their highlighting of specific, positive characteristics displayed in their respective online communities. Overall members described online community as a valuable part of their spiritual lives and growth. It enabled them to connect with God by facilitating interaction with others who had identical experiences and convictions. They valued having interaction with those who also cared deeply about similar spiritual issues. Some emphasised experiencing more care, trust-honesty, fellowship and encouragement online than they received in their local church. Members valued online prayer support and having access to teachings or discussions on topics not available in their real world church. However, most stressed online fellowship was “incomplete” because it lacked non-verbal feedback and touch.

Another key finding was that, while online Christian community structures are quite different from local church manifestations of a similar theological background, their ministry focus and message are often quite similar. In this study each online community was linked to a specific conception of the church given in Dulles’ models outlined in chapter one. The Community of Prophecy exemplified elements of the Church as Mystical Communion model. This is an inter-personal model of church stressing unity and emphasising the role of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the Church. Experiences of the Spirit provide a common language for the group. This community encouraged engagement with the Spirit on an individual level in ways fitting the communal experience of faith. The Online Church correlated with the Church as Herald and Church as Servant models. The Herald model highlights a congregation gathered around the proclamation of the scriptures. This community encouraged members to share “testimonies” and frequently exchanged Bible teachings with one another. The Servant model focuses on being a “church for others” as members provide help without regard to personal benefit or gain. This group strives to be a servant community, within the limitations of its membership, by offering advice and encouragement to those who are hurting. The Anglican Communion Online represents the Church as Sacrament model. This is a liturgy-based model, seeing the Church as a symbolic community focused on corporate participation in sacramental acts. This community places

high value on Anglo-Catholic liturgical worship and theology. Members agree that the Eucharist is central in their worship, and while “breaking bread” is not possible online, it is a focus of many of the community’s face-to-face listmeets.

From the findings summarised above three conclusions about the nature of online Christian community and the Church can be made. These are stated in the next section.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

ONLINE COMMUNITY A SUPPLEMENT, NOT SUBSTITUTE FOR OFFLINE CHURCH

You can't live a total church life within OLC. You can't be involved in Sunday School classes...in leading music...The fact that I do not have a regular church at present is of great sadness to me. The OLC is not something which takes the place of a local church for me and never will be.

(Personal Interview with Carla Prasher, OLC)

From this study it can be concluded that online involvement is not causing most people to leave their local church or shy away from real world participation. The majority of community members in this study described their online involvement as a “supplement” rather than a substitute for local church involvement. Most indicated they were active in a local congregation, many stating they held leadership positions such as Sunday School teachers, lay readers, prayer team members and few even served as ministers. Others indicated they frequently shared with their church teaching and prayer requests they received online.

Online community was described as adding to the experience of the local church. One AC member used the phrase “companion parish” to describe how it enabled them to connect with the real world Church online and wider body of Christ. Another AC member said online community had been valuable for her self-esteem since she was judged by “the ideas I put in print” and not her clothes or mannerisms. A Community of Prophecy member described online community as a “sounding board”, a place to ask spiritual questions, receive advice and stay “up-to-date of what God is saying all over”. What it supplements is spiritual information and, more importantly, interaction. This is expanded upon in the next conclusion.

Those few individuals who indicated online community served as “substitute” for real world participation indicated they had a need to be part of the local church, but their current circumstances prevented them. Members gave three reasons for their non-church involvement. First, being unable to locate churches that would accept them was noted.⁶ Secondly, being unable to find a church that could provide the teaching or interaction they wanted was indicated.⁷ Thirdly, the inability to get past previous negative church experiences was cited.⁸ One member of the OLC said she missed participating in live worship, singing and receiving regular teaching, but until she was able to find a local church willing to accept her and her disabilities online community met her need for the “caring and sharing” part of church.

While online Christian fellowship was valued, most members stressed participation in local churches was also important, many noting the lack of physical contact during times of crisis as a disadvantage of online community. Email and the Internet facilitate frequent contact with others, often more consistent than what members experience in their local church. However, this is a limited form of contact, typically text-only. The “Chocolate Chip Cookie Factor” stresses members’ desire face-to-face and physical contact with one another. Touch is an important part of expressing care. As one AC member said, “I can’t share Communion with the List, and I can only very rarely hug them.” This is the main reason online community is a supplement, but does not become a full substitute for local church participation.⁹

ONLINE COMMUNITY SUPPLEMENTS RELATIONSHIPS

They were my psychiatrists. They were my counsellors. They were my social workers, and that was email. That was not face-to-face and not over the phone, that was email.

(Personal Interview with Rick Metts, OLC)

Online community supplements the real world church in the area of relationships. While members stressed online community is supplemental, what was highlighted as being supplemented was personal interaction and relationships, and not simply information

⁶ Note comments made in Chapter 6 in “The Internet is Blind” section pp. 190-192.

⁷ Note comments made in Chapter 5 in “Online Involvement Influences Real World Church Involvement” section p. 162.

⁸ Note comments made in Chapter 7 in “Anglican Communion Online as a Social Network” section p. 238.

⁹ For further discussion on the theological importance of embodiment consider discussion of the “embodied discourse” in Jolyon Mitchell, *Visually Speaking* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), pp. 209-213.

exchange. While some initially join online Christian communities for information, they typically remain members because of the friendships they form. Several characteristics distinguishing online relationships were highlighted such as the ability to be transparent online, frequent contact, demonstrating care and intimacy through open communication, acceptance by others from differing backgrounds and being “known” within the group. When describing an email list as a community, members often said the Internet facilitates higher levels of intimacy, care and commonality than they had found in their real world faith communities.

OLC members noted relational support as the primary component supplemented by online community. The OLC provided a “listening ear”, people who understood their physical limitations, Christian counsel, and a place to receive support/encouragement. Many described online relationships as more dynamic for those with sensory impairments than those found offline. The local church was described as a place they received teaching, but the OLC was where members found Christian friendships and spiritual-emotional input.

In the AC the ability to interact at a deeper level online was highlighted. Several members commented that they knew AC listsibs better than members of their local parish, because online community focuses on dialogue at a more profound level than offline parishes. One member stressed the local parish facilitates few opportunities to discuss personal issues of faith and theology in-depth unless you are involved in church ministry. Individuals became committed to online Christian community through forming relationships with people who seemed to care for them.

Online community provides members with a sense of belonging. The importance individuals placed on online relationships and socialising was dependent on members’ past or current church experiences and job circumstances. Online community can be described as the search for a virtual *Cheers*¹⁰, a TV show based on a group of characters gathering daily at a local bar. As the theme song stated, people want to go, “Where everybody knows your name and they’re always glad you came”.

¹⁰ American situation comedy running 1982–1993, Starring Ted Danson and Shelley Long/Kristie Alley, Directed by Michael Zinberg and Tim Berry.

DESCRIPTIONS OF ONLINE COMMUNITY CRITIQUE THE REAL WORLD CHURCH

In your own parish and in your own small little world you don't find that many people that are highly literate. This group (the AC) care a great deal about theology, their religion, their faith. In a parish you may have a handful of those people, but those people will not have worshipped in a thousand different churches, in different countries... You don't get to know people in a parish (at this level), so it is much easier to become part of the AC community than it is to become a member of a parish.

(Personal Interview with Marjie Ashworth, AC)

Members' descriptions of online community, reasons given for online involvement and benefits they say they receive formulates a critique of the real world Church. Online Christian community describes itself as a family, consciously trying to create a kindred atmosphere. This description was qualified as a "prophetic", "loving" and "supportive" family in this study by online community members, stressing that this is a healthy family, in which people care for each other. Online family is seen as part of the larger Church family, enabling members to engage with Christian brothers and sisters they would normally be separated from due to geographic or physical limitation. This description paints a positive image of online relationships. Descriptions of online family also inferred that offline family was sometimes unbalanced or unable to meet needs in the way online family could.

Members are drawn to Online Christian community for a variety of reasons. Housebound members and those with limited time for socialising value being able to "talk" to others and develop friendships. It was said offline church often did not facilitate times for discussion or opportunities to form intimate relationships through communication. Several people referred to online community as a 24-hour church, offering instant access to other Christians any time of the day or night, filling the gap between interaction through church services or events. It was not only access to other Christians that was highlighted as desirable. Several said it was easier to share and receive prayer online. Prayer support was noted by some as a primary reason they were active online. Members felt they could trust those who committed to pray for them online, unlike promises made by church members they felt they had little relationship with. Online Christian community was described as more accessible and open than the local church.

A key benefit of Christian online community noted by members was the Internet's ability to expand their vision of what it means to be part of the "body of Christ". As one CP member

said, "For me the exciting feature of the 'online community' is that it is international in scope, so it brings greater immediacy to the 'abstract' doctrine of the universal Body of Christ". Many articulated frustration at their church's internal, local focus and seemingly disinterest or lack of exposure to wider developments in the Church.

However, it is not the intention of this thesis to paint a completely negative picture of the offline Church. Some online community members shared reservations about the extent of honesty, intimacy and trust individuals could achieve online. Those who emphasised the benefits online community could bring to the "body of Christ" as a whole often did so with a hint of hesitation. A balance between online and real world community and church involvement is needed, recognising both environments possess strengths and weaknesses. Both can invigorate or stifle relationships depending on how they are structured and focused. One CP member explained this in the questionnaire "additional comments" section as, "I have found once again that God has no limits and have discovered spiritual reality in cyberspace. Live church can be 'dead' or even bring death in empty exercises...likewise cyber space participation sows death or life depending on whether the individual is sowing into his flesh (death) or into the Spirit (life)...(Romans 8:6 RSV)."¹¹

Online community can be used to critique the real world church in several ways: in the ways it functions as a family, the opportunities it provides for interaction, facilitating caring relationships and bringing understanding to being part of the global Body of Christ. Further investigation highlights attributes individuals in this study see as essential to community and wish an offline church to possess. This is the focus of the next section.

RE-DEFINING COMMUNITY: ESSENTIAL ATTRIBUTES

From the analysis presented above it can be concluded that online community serves as a mirror for the Church to observe what attributes people look for in community. Attributes of online community highlighted by members serve as a picture of what individuals hope Christian community to be like. Identifying and expounding upon these characteristics presents a re-definition or contextualisation of Christian community. Five key attributes of community emerged from this study: relationship, care, value, consistent contact and in-depth-intimate communication. These are explained below.

¹¹ CP Email Questionnaire Response, Date sent: Mon, 30 Mar 1998 12:40:04 -0500, Subject: quest reply

RELATIONSHIP

What I am experiencing on the Internet...it makes the whole thing of the Bride of Christ more feasible...not just something to read about.

(Personal Interview with Charlotte Erasmuson, CP)

Online community focuses on building and supporting relationships. Many of the definitions of community given by online community members in their interviews were people-focused and relationship-centred. Common phrases used were “bound together by beliefs and interests”, “a group of people who get together for fellowship”, “come together for a common purpose” and “having a common sense of care for one another”.¹² Essentially, these definitions portrayed community as people focused on building and maintaining relationships directed towards a common purpose. Christian community was expressed as, “a group of people who recognise that connection, of being in the body, and see themselves as brothers and sisters in Christ, supporting one another in their worship and devotion”.¹³ In Christian community people see God as the focus supporting the network of relationships. It is described as God-created friendship bonds.

Relationship based on communication is the central focus of online community. Email-based community allows individuals to learn about others through their posting without having direct contact with them. This facilitates the creation of a sense of knowing one other through limited actual contact. A local church’s focus is divided among a variety of tasks such as service preparation, maintaining of buildings, budgets and other structural duties. Facilitating relationships within church life is often limited to Bible study or small groups and seen as the responsibility of individual members rather than church structures. People can feel limited in the number of relationships they can develop due to their duties and responsibilities within church life. Online relationships are self-selected based on personal preference. Offline relationships in church can be seen as by-products of church participation. People want to be in relationship with others and not just contact. They crave the ability to connect with other people, as well as having individuals investing and becoming involved in their lives. This leads on to the following two attributes of care and value.

¹² Quotes taken from Personal Interviews with Louise Foot, Patrick Goring and Jonathan Espie.

¹³ Personal Interview with Gail Ball.

CARE

I've had communication online where I've really felt 'hugged' when I really need it.
(Personal Interview with Louise Foot, CP)

In this study individuals online indicated they felt cared for and accepted by their online communities. Email enables individuals to receive frequent and instantaneous responses to their prayer requests or confession of personal struggles. Self-disclosure online can be easier for individuals than face-to-face confessions. Online members see a community's ability to care for one another through public posts directed towards specific individuals, portraying the community as a supportive place where people are loved and understood. Individuals and communal expressions of care and acceptance create a unified and "safe" environment.

Some indicated offline church is not an easy place to find acceptance, especially for the disabled or "different". Online community provides a social outlet where people are judged on the basis of their written words and not physical appearance or ability to express themselves verbally. Online community becomes a place people go to in search of empathetic Christian support, identified as lacking in their offline interaction. Individuals want to be cared for; they want to know their voice will be heard, that expressing opinions will be supported, their need for encouragement will be met, and their self-disclosure will be protected and seen as important to the group. Feeling cared for encourages members to display empathy for others in the community. People desire to be cared for, and in exchange, care for others.

VALUE

I really love (most) of the folks on the list! It's very difficult to leave the list. I've left twice over frustration (we run cycles where the same threads get hashed out over and over again when new folks come on board...) and once because the volume of mail simply became overwhelming. Since I joined 2-1/2 years ago I've left three times and the longest time away was about three weeks. I've always rejoined because I miss the people, I miss the banter, I miss learning new things and I miss what's happening in the lives of my listmates!

(Email sent to AC, Date sent: Wed, 26 May 1999 10:25:51 -0500, Subject: Web page and the AC)

People desire to be valued by their community, as individuals with something to say and contribute. The online context eliminates physical and external cues so people interact with the "spirit of a person", as one OLC member explained. When people respond to a member's contributions they feel that their participation is validated. When their personal struggles elicit offers of prayer and affirmation of their personhood, their presence within the

community is validated. Feeling valued encourages them to value other community members. Many online Christian communities often have a long-term, established membership where people are encouraged to stay committed and involved. It is not simply group pressure that maintains membership, but the combination of personal and corporate interaction open for observation by the entire community. Online interaction facilitates public displays of value for the whole community to scrutinise.

People also hope to be part of a community that has significance. Communities with a clearly defined mission or purpose offer value to their membership by providing the opportunity to be a part of something larger than themselves. Members, to understand their roles and purpose within a group and endow an online community with real world significance, use communal narratives. Individuals find value by being given a specific role or purpose within a community, whether it be an official designated role such as prayer list coordinator, discussion moderator, technical consultant or a self-selected role of encourager, information source or counsellor. One individual described themselves as a “walking pool of information” on specific topics, which she shares online and gleans from the community to share with her real world church. People seek to have purpose, to be valued and to see their community as valuable.

CONSISTENT CONTACT

Close physical community is important, but I don't get the same feeling for prayer that I do when I am with the AC. And I know when at the AC when someone says they'll pray for me, they will. That's a given. That's a trust because I have seen it happen. Whereas at church someone can say 'oh I'll pray for you' but I don't know that they will.

(Personal Interview with Jonathan Espie, AC)

The ability to maintain consistent contact is made easier through Internet technology. Twenty-four hours a day accessibility is a unique part of online community; individuals can have contact with Christians any hour of the day or night. This is especially valuable for those who experience an unexpected crisis or are struggling with emotional issues such as loneliness or depression that often surface late at night. The Internet provides a “seven days a week ministry” that is often seen as lost by the church due to time pressures and resource limitations. It is used to fill the gap between scheduled church meetings where people can have contact with other Christians. Email is a quick and fast way to check up on others, to share a concern or ask for prayer as frequently as one chooses or desires.

People want to have persistent contact with Christians in a common project. They want to be able to connect with others publicly and privately on issues of faith. Email creates a written record of words of advice or encouragement, a visual artefact that can be referred to later. It also allows people to be part of a discussion, with the benefit of not having to congregate with the others involved at a specific time. This allows more freedom of choice: people can choose when, for how long and to what extent they want to be involved unlike real world church meeting which is limited to a specific time and place. This fits in with many people's hectic lifestyles and crammed time schedules. People crave to have consistent contact with others who offer them support and a listening ear, even a cyber one.

IN-DEPTH-INTIMATE COMMUNICATION

WE have been absolutely amazed at how the Holy Spirit can use something like email to touch the hearts of folks half way around the world even to the point that they weep. For this we praise Jesus, knowing that He has touched them through electronic email. That is a miracle.

(CP email, Date sent: Sun, 22 Mar 1998 00:37:03 EST, Subject: How did the course go?)

Online interaction is intentional, purposeful and focused. Some find it is easier to "go deeper sooner" as the necessity for small talk to establish a relationship is typically eliminated. Individuals felt many communicative relationships were limited to small talk. They stated in-depth discussions of beliefs were limited to select Bible studies or adult education groups in many church social settings. Some online community members expressed disappointment and hurts with real world church, which encouraged them to go online in search of Christians they could trust and be honest with. Individuals online exhibit a wish to find others who share commonality of experiences and beliefs and to discuss these in an open forum.

People look for honesty and transparency in their communication, the willingness for others to share personal details of their lives with them and the ability to express themselves in personal and private ways, knowing this disclosure will be honoured. In a sense, people are searching for a communicative "place of refuge" where they can find nurture, respect, understanding and like-minded individuals. People long for "significant spiritual friendships" or "spiritual soulmates" who will challenge them, encourage them and keep them accountable in their spiritual growth. When people find these relationships they exhibit high levels of dedication to them and the context in which they are formed. Relationships formed online also means face-to-face meetings can be deeper and richer because a general knowledge about the individual and their convictions has already been established. They also

increase individuals' desire to have face-to-face contact to extend their relationships to a new level. People want relationships which are intimate and in-depth in the level of self-disclosure and personal beliefs shared. They also long for honest communication with individuals they feel they can trust.

SUMMARY

This section highlights five attributes people desire to find in a community, based on observations made in this study. They look for relationship, to be connected and committed to others. They desire care, to be cared for by their community. They desire value, to be seen as valuable as an individual and part of a community of value. They seek consistent communication with members of their community. They long for in-depth and intimate communication, where individuals share openly about their beliefs and spiritual lives. This presents a picture of community based on relationship, communication and love. It portrays community as more concerned about how individuals are treated than the structure or focus of the community. The working definition of community has been a network of relationships between individuals connecting to a common purpose. This section has defined the nature of those relationships, the characteristics most sought after in a community. The Internet essentially becomes a magnifying glass, highlighting people's general desired traits of community. The next section expounds on the focus of community as a relational network and how that influences conceptions of Christian community and the Church.

COMMUNITY AS A RELATIONAL NETWORK

On the basis of these attributes it can be concluded that many individuals in this study conceive of community as a relational network. Many aspects of this study are defined in terms of relationships. Online community narratives were described as emerging through members' understanding of their relationship to the community. How an online community defined itself in connection to its real world Church counterparts was said to guide internal and external community relations. Identifying community as a network of relationships is a central claim in this thesis. Online community is said to enhance individuals' search for their personal and corporate identity in contemporary society.

Turkle in *Life on the Screen* similarly concludes that Internet usage reshapes the ways people conceive of human identity. She argues the Internet is essentially about the search for self-

knowledge. She states, "Social beings that we are, we are trying to (as Marshall McLuhan said) 'retribalise'. And the computer is playing a central role."¹⁴ Social attempts to retribalise online bring humanity back to the basic emotional need to know and be known. Turkle states that greater self-awareness is needed within general society, if people are to make meaning of life online. "If we cultivate our awareness of what stands behind our screen personae, we are more likely to succeed in using virtual experience for personal transformation."¹⁵ The Internet, therefore, becomes a space for humanity to examine and reflect on itself and its relationships.

Online identity is formed not only simply through self-creation or presentation, but also through identification. Through "connections" with particular online sources, whether they be websites or online discussion forums, individuals are involved in identity formation. As individuals move from being solitary web surfers into an online environment where presence is based on communication, the longing for relationships is clearly illustrated. Attaching oneself to an online community provides definition and boundaries for the self, as the identity of the individual becomes rooted in the community's ethos.

In his recent book *Information Technology and Cyberspace* David Pullinger discusses Internet communities as "shared relationships among people" in contrast to "shared communication in the same physical space".¹⁶ While questioning the kind of relationship that can be cultivated when limited to words, he sees these "new patterns of relating"¹⁷ as having the potentiality to create new communities of faith for the digital age. He argues for the development of "networks of concern" that develop a "situated knowledge" for a certain type of technology "from the perspective of lived experience".¹⁸ Internet communities of faith must learn to utilise technology in a way that allows individuals to communicate truthfully and "establish a morality appropriate to 21st century life".¹⁹ Online community involvement offers individuals the opportunity to reflect on their relationships to Christ, others and society in new social space. Describing community as a network of relationships provides a metaphor easily transferable into the online context. It also applies to the model presented in

¹⁴ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 178.

¹⁵ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 269.

¹⁶ David Pullinger, *Information Technology and Cyberspace. Extra Connected Living* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001), p. 76.

¹⁷ Pullinger, p. 87

¹⁸ Pullinger, p. 133

¹⁹ Pullinger, p. 133

this thesis, the Internet as Social Network. Characterising community as a network places emphasis on the establishment and maintenance of connections of integrity.

Online community is also a dialogic community; relationships are rooted in communication and digital dialogue. Community in a communicative context emphasises human relationship as primary, not the individuals.²⁰ Martin Buber describes this as the “I-Thou” relationship where individuals gain their value and existence by entering into relationship with others. He states people are constantly in relationship whether it be the I-Thou or I-It, because communication can not take place in isolation. It is only in people’s relation to others that they begin to know themselves. Buber describes community as authentic relationship stating,

*The true community does not arise through people’s having feeling for one another (though indeed not without it), but through, first, the taking their stand in living mutual relation with a Living Centre, and, second, their being in living mutual relation to one another.*²¹

In this, humanity is designed to be in relationship, and the relation is mutual, for as the I and Thou interact they each affect the other as they form the I-Thou pair. The idea that the “I” can only be understood in the context of “Thou” returns the discussion to the opening quote by John Donne in chapter one. “No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, part of the main...because I am involved in Mankind.”²² It is understood that human beings are designed to be in relationship with others; it is innate, programmed into their very existence.

In chapter one this point was made in the discussion of the Trinity serving as a theological picture of community. As the Trinity derives its identity from its relationship, so humanity derives its identity from its relationships with others. Some mystics within the Christian tradition, such as Jeanne Guyon, made similar claims that relationship with God could only be fully understood through the image of marriage. The disembodied divine community of the Trinity is expressed in the embodied image of marriage as two become interconnected as one flesh. Humans are created to emulate the relationship exhibited by the Trinity, not only

²⁰ For a greater discussion on dialogic communication and relationship see Clifford Christians, ‘The Ethics of Being in a Communications Context’ in *Communication Ethics and Universal Values*, edited by Clifford Christians and Michael Traber (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), pp. 3-23.

²¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937), p. 45.

²² *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, p. 190.

in marriage but also in their search for community with others. While individuals remain physically separate, they choose to join themselves with the hearts and spirits of others mirroring the Trinity's community of oneness. Disembodied community provides a model of the ideal which embodied community is to manifest. Online community provides a disembodied context with which to re-examine the balance of relationship that should take place in offline community.

The gospel story can be understood as focused on relationship: relationship formed, lost, recaptured and finally restored in divine fulfilment. For some Christian writers the end of the story is heavenly marriage where man is rescued in the ultimate relationship of love and identification, the realisation that "I am my beloved's and he is mine"²³. In creation humanity is given an invitation to be part of this larger story, a story written in humankind's soul, a call to experience the intimacy of the Trinity. The Trinity exists to bring glory to the others. Being made in God's image means humans are relational beings at their very core. As this study has shown, people hope to be cared for, valued and experience intimacy with others. Community, online as well as offline, involves individuals being inextricably linked. Identity is derived from this divine reflection and is consolidated through relationships. Turkle asserts that going online is assessing a space facilitating self-discovery of who we are. Some of the data in this research suggests people are yearning for the restoration of relationship and the online environment provides a new sphere for humanity to restore relationship with others and ultimately God.

The conception of online community as a digital relational network is therefore offered as a new starting point for discussing community. This relates to the suggestion offered by Bell, noted in the introduction, of finding alternative ways to describe forms of community in a digital culture.²⁴ While this conception is still in need of further explanation in order for it to be useful in specifically theological or sociological contexts, for the purposes of this thesis it has served as a way to encapsulate the findings of this study.

²³ Song of Songs 6.3, Consult: Jeanne Guyon, *Song of the Bride* (Jacksonville, FL: Christian Publishing House, 1990).

²⁴ Lorne Dawson similarly suggests that discussions of religious community online might need to utilise new understandings of social bonds and relationships. Consult: Lorne Dawson, 'Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies', in *Religion in the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, ed. by Jeffery Hadden and Douglas Cowan (New York: JAI-Elsevier Science, 2000), pp. 25-54.

FINAL COMMENTS

The End of the Internet

Congratulations! This is the last page.

Thank you for visiting the End of the Internet. There are no more links.

You must now turn off your computer and go do something productive.

Go read a book, for pete's sake.

-“The End of the Internet” <<http://www.shibumi.org/eoti/index.htm>>

The crux of this thesis’ findings is that what make online communities vibrant is not so much the location in cyberspace, but the attributes they exhibit and the dialogue on the subject of community which their existence has created. New forms of Christian community are arguably being built in other places, such as through the cell church movement and community development projects. This study is not to say the Church is completely lacking in its ability to create and nurture relational communities of care and support. However, the comments of many online participants can not be ignored as the involvement online of many has led to the re-discovery of what it means to be in relationship with others. This thesis has shown that in some instances the Internet facilitates more vibrant relationships than those which some individuals experience in certain aspects of their local church. In these circumstances the tension between online and offline experience of community can be characterised as Alone—Together vs. Together –Alone.

Picture the great cathedrals throughout Britain. These vast stone buildings with their towering Gothic or Romanesque arches have been described as “early examples of virtual reality, their size and scale out of proportion to ordinary life” helping reinforce the “other-worldly aspects of Christianity”.²⁵ Inside the church congregation meets for worship each Sunday. Yet individual members and visitors often enter alone, sit alone, leave alone. Often their only acknowledgement by others may be a “passing of the peace” or a handshake from the minister at the door. Here members are gathered together, yet it is in this gathering they can realise a sense of loneliness; they are together, alone.

Picture then a computer in an individual’s home or office, often their place of sanctuary away from the rest of the world. Imagine the individual logged on to their email account, which they faithfully check each day. A message from an Internet friend pops on the screen; they open it and smile at the latest news, quickly responding to a question they pose on a

²⁵ Sherman and Judkins, p. 221.

theological discussion topic. They open another email to see another member has sent them a personal note of thanks for an encouraging post they sent out the previous day. They may even take a moment to bow their head and pray for a request posted that day on the list. The individual may be alone in the room, their only company being their computer screen. Yet this technology and a steady stream of messages show they are linked together with a greater collective, a global community of like minds and spirits; they are alone, together.

These two pictures might seem stereotypical, presenting a pessimistic view of real world church and an overly optimistic view of online community. Yet what is being emphasised here in the “together-alone vs. alone- together” scenarios is that the community people are looking for more than a connection through physical gathering and shared worship; they desire to connect with others in communication on emotional, intellectual and spiritual levels. The real world Church can use these pictures as measuring tools as to what type of community their church facilitates and maintains. While online community is limited and lacking certain significant aspects such as embodied contact, yet when real world options do not provide the spiritual connection many individuals long for, it can be a “Godsend”²⁶ to know there is another realm where these aspirations can be realised. For this reason many individuals will continue to invest in online community, thus posing a challenge to the Church and the culture of religion. Thus this study’s findings can serve as a teaching tool for the Church, in helping identify what people seek in their community relationships

The conclusions of this thesis also call for further the examination of the authenticity of meetings and relationships online. Some troubling elements and interesting questions emerge from this study which are in need of investigation in the future. This thesis asserts that involvement in online community supplements some individuals in the area of relationship. Therefore, a question needing to be asked is, At what point will the supplemental nature of online community become a substitute? When and under what circumstances will online involvement be considered the primary realm of social engagement for its users? Potentially online relationship could cause dis-investment in real world relationship. If offline relationships are seen as producing less emotional return, care and support than online interaction, individuals might begin to consider online community as their primary social or spiritual network. At what point an online community becomes a substitute is in need of investigation.

²⁶ Response given by an OLC member in an online questionnaire.

Another area of concern is instances when online community might cause individuals to relinquish their rights or opportunities. This has to do with issues of freedom, creating a tension between emancipation and relinquishment. The data suggests online community could lead to both. It can offer the freedom to become involved in multiple contexts for specific, designated purposes or it can lead to self-limitation to the sphere that is perceived to meet most of the individual's needs. In an interview, Andrea McPake questioned the effects of her own online community involvement, while reflecting on her university years where she chose not to be actively involved in a real world church. She said, "I never really found a home parish in Connecticut...I don't know if I hadn't had the AC, maybe I would have looked harder, because that would have been much more important to me". Online community may offer fellowship in a less threatening manner that appears more accessible, trying to find the same type of community face-to-face might appear to take too much time or effort. Along with this, a question to be asked is, What kind of community is being created online? The search for those common beliefs and ideals can create an unnatural sense of homogeneity. It can be argued that the forced interaction of individuals with differences is the strength of real world community and what the Internet creates is an unnatural ghettoising of like attracting like.

Other questions are raised by this research relating to the limitations of online community due to access. The Internet has created a new international class of people referred to as "netizens", "cyberonauts" or cyber-citizens. Susan Leigh Star in *Cultures of the Internet* describes life online as being "homed" in cyberspace and lists several characteristics that can be assumed about those who live online. They have enough money to buy the basic computer set-up and have a place where this can be housed with access to a telephone line. They have access to computer maintenance and support people who can answer questions and help them plug into the larger infrastructure. They are literate and can either type, see, and sit up or have special support. Finally, a person "homed" in cyberspace has the time, inclination and a wide enough social network to have others to write to and read.²⁷ Netizens therefore represent a select group of people who hold distinct ideas of how the world functions on either side of the screen. While the Church is arguably open to all, online community is not. This raises numerous related ethical concerns. Is online community predominately a Western world phenomenon, tied to those areas which have the most computer access? Is online community truly global? What type of structures, political and

²⁷ Star, *Cultures of the Internet*, p. 26.

social, does online community support and promote? To what extent can online Christian communities represent the global body of Christ? Ethical questions such as these are in need of greater exploration.²⁸

Also it has been shown that online community is a story-formed community, where members co-create a communal identity which gives individuals and the group meaning. Each case study constructed a community-specific narrative, providing cohesion, meaning and a tool to evaluate its authenticity. These community narratives could form the basis for the development of models of online religious community, models that could be used to exemplify the form and function of various online religious communities. Potential models emerging from this study are Online Community as Spiritual Network, Online Community as Support Network, and Online Community as Religious Expression Network. This is another area for possible development outwith this thesis.

There is a hint of sadness and surprise in this thesis in the fact that it is technology, which is forcing the re-examination of real world relationships, especially relating to Christian community and the Church. It could be that in some instances the emphasis has been on doing Church, rather than on being Church. Thus, structures and programs might have taken precedence over examining the basic emotional and spiritual needs of people. While the mission of the Church can not be disregarded in favour of a predominately inward focus, this research suggests that the pursuit of activity and information in today's Church life has caused relationships and investment in one another to be overlooked in Church life in some contexts. As one goal of the Christian life is to be transformed into the image of Christ, focus on becoming the reflection of Christ in the Trinity must be maintained as well as building the kingdom.²⁹ If the pursuit of relationship through computer networks, emphasised in this thesis, can serve as a mirror to stimulate the Church to re-examine its call and structure, then this research truly has something of importance to offer Christian culture. It has been said that humanity was created to be a community of oneness, to be one with others in a network of relationship, which seeks to emulate the network of the Trinity. The pursuit of community on earth remains a struggle and a journey. It will only be in the final consummation at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb that what it truly means to be in community will be realised. Until then, cultivating embodied Christ-centred relationship

²⁸ For an overview of ethical concerns related to Internet usage see, Cees J. Hamelink, *The Ethics of Cyberspace* (London: Sage Publications, 2000)

²⁹ Reference relates assessments made in: Thomas 'a Kempis, *The Imitations of Christ* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd)

with others offers a picture of what it means to be in relation with the disembodied Divine. Therefore, the Internet and online community can be used as a place of reflection for the Church and contemporary society on what it means to be a community.

GLOSSARY

AC—Anglican Communion Online, online community case study three.

ARPANET—the Advanced Research Projects Agency computer network established by the U.S. Department of Defence, forerunner to the Internet.

Bulletin Board Services (BBS)—electronic message system running on public-domain software and allowing individuals to post messages in electronic spaces functioning like a bulletin board.

Chat rooms—message systems providing synchronous communication between individuals logged on, often linked to a website.

Computer-mediated Communication (CMC)—refers to various forms of technology that allows individuals to communicate through the medium of the computer. The study of textual based online communication.

CP—Community of Prophecy, online community case study one.

Cyberspace—a term defined by William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, used to describe the process of entering the space said to exist behind the computer screen. A word used to explain the new space seemingly created through the merging of the material, symbolic and experiential in the Internet.

Electronic Mail (email)—a form of electronic correspondence exchanged through computer-mediated networks facilitated through various software and service providers.

Email List— email-based message systems allowing individuals to subscribe and receive email sent to a designated group on a specific topic.

Emoticons—emotional icon, the use of keyboard characters to pictorially represent emotions in text-based communication or abbreviated catch phrases. E.g. :-) representing a smiley face and LOL representing “laughing out loud”.

Flaming—the exchange of angry and often derogatory comments on a given topic usually by an individual in an online discussion group.

Internet—the “network of connected networks,” an access tool for connecting to computer networks. Provides the hardware and structure to the online world.

Internet Relay Chat (IRC)—message system combining features of conversation and writing which allows users to participate in two-way asynchronous interaction.

Multi-User Dungeons/Dimension (MUDs)—cyberspace role-playing games, initially developed to model the fantasy game Dungeons and Dragons. MUDs use computers to construct a virtual environment in which participants interact around an on-going story.

Multi-user Object Oriented (MOOs)—similar to MUDs, often having an image-based component.

Newsgroups—electronic message systems in which individuals log on, read and respond to messages posted by other participants.

Offline—used to describe any facet of life occurring outside the computer screen.

Online—anything which is said to take place in a computer network environment, such as on the Internet.

OLC—The Online Church, online community case study two.

Real world—refers to public and private interactions in daily life occurring within the physical world.

Social Network Analysis (SNA)—a sociological method of analysis with the underlying assumption that communities are in their essence social structures and not spatial structures. This approach involves identity nodes (persons, organisations, etc.) and sets of ties (relationships) connecting them.

Spamming—posting an inappropriate message on an online discussion list or sending an unsolicited message to a user, equivalent to receiving online junk email.

World Wide Web (WWW)— a tool used to navigate on the network and locate information, the application to which most people refer when using the word “Internet”;

APPENDIX A

COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY –EMAIL QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for your willingness to share about your experiences using e-mail/the Internet and being part of the Community of Prophecy (CP). Please add your answers among the text of the questions in whatever way is easiest for you.

E-mail your responses to [REDACTED]

Heidi Campbell
University of Edinburgh
New College
Edinburgh EH1 2LX
SCOTLAND

QUESTIONNAIRE

=====

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

=====

Gender:
Marital Status:
Number of People in Household:
Age:
Profession:
City and Country of Residence:
Church/denomination you attend:

Number of hours spent using E-MAIL each week:
List primary reason for using e-mail:

Number of Hours spent using the INTERNET/WWW each week:
List the THREE WEB SITES you MOST OFTEN contact:

Level of technical background:
Do you take to new technology easily?
How do you feel about/see your computer (a tool, a friend, a business-related object, used for entertainment, other)?

Where do you get ACCESS to e-mail/the Internet? (work, home, cyber-cafe, other)

=====

QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE COMMUNITY OF PROPHECY:

=====

1) How long have you been part of the CP?
-Why did you join?

- 2) Did you participate in the CP Training?
 - If yes, in which form of Activation (e-mail, IRC, real world group) did you participate?
 - In one sentence please describe your experience in the CP:

- 3) Compare your participation in the CP with your participation in your local church. Is it supplement, alternative, a temporary phase, a substitute, a bridge, etc.?
 - Please explain:

- 4) Are your relationships on-line MORE or LESS intimate than those within your local church/place you regularly worship?

- 5) Do you believe that you care for members of an on-line community as you do in a "real world" (face-to-face) community?
 - Can you have the same degree of honesty and trust? Please comment:

- 6) Is a prayer via e-mail from someone you haven't met as effective or meaningful as a prayer "in real time" from a friend or church member?

- 7) Do you see your involvement in the CP impacting your relationships in your local church?

QUESTIONS RELATING TO E-MAIL & INTERNET USAGE

- 8) Do you belong to any other Internet or on-line communities?
 - Please List:

- 9) Why have you chosen to belong with the communities you belong to?
 - Describe your involvement in those groups:

- 10) If you have access to the Internet, what types of sites and services do you regularly visit or use?

- 11) Do you "talk" or communicate with people differently on-line compared with "real life"?
 - If you do, please try briefly to illustrate what you mean.

12) How would your life be different if you didn't have access to e-mail/the Internet?

-If yes, in what way(s)?

Any additional comments you would like to make:

Do you give permission for your postings to the CP from 12 January- 26 March 1998 to be cited in my research?*

*Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns about the use of your e-mail postings. (In my research the name of the community has been changed and any e-mail material which may be quoted will be attributed anonymously--I will not use your name)

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR TIME!

APPENDIX B

THE ONLINE CHURCH –EMAIL QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for your willingness to share about your experiences using e-mail/the Internet and being part of the Online Church (OLC)
Please take your time and add your answers the text of the questions in whatever way is easiest for you.

E-mail your responses to: Heidi Campbell

Heidi Campbell
University of Edinburgh
New College
Edinburgh EH1 2LX
SCOTLAND

QUESTIONNAIRE

=====
BACKGROUND INFORMATION
=====

Gender:
Marital Status:
Number of People in Household:
Age:
Profession:
City and Country of Residence:
Church/denomination you attend:

Are you actively involved in a local church?
-In what ways?

Number of hours spent using E-MAIL each week:

What is your primary use of e-mail: (Select One: correspondence, getting information, building relationships, news, work, education, ministry or other—please indicate):

Number of Hours spent using the INTERNET/WWW each week:

List the THREE WEB SITES you MOST OFTEN contact:

Level of technical background: (Select One: none, low, intermediate, high, professional or other—please indicate)

Do you take to new technology easily?

How do you feel about/see your computer? (Select One: a tool, a friend, a business-related object, used for entertainment or other—please indicate)
-Why?

Where do you get ACCESS to e-mail/the Internet? (Select One: work, home, work & home, library or other—please indicate)

QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE ONLINE CHURCH:

1) How long have you been part of the OLC? (Please give answer in years and /or months)

2) Why did you join?

How would you describe your contribution to the list?

How would you describe any benefits received from the list?

How would you describe your involvement/role in the list? (Such as lurker, frequent poster, infrequent poster or other—please describe)

-In one sentence summarise your experience in the OLC:

3) Compare your participation in the OLC with your participation in your local church. Is it supplement, alternative, a temporary phase, a substitute, a bridge or other—please indicate?

-Please explain:

4) Are your relationships on-line MORE intimate, LESS intimate or the SAME as compared with those you have with others within your local church/place you regularly worship?

-Please explain your answer briefly.

5) Do you believe that you care for members of an on-line community , such as OLC, as you do in a "real world" (face-to-face) community? (Select One: Yes, No, Depends or other—please indicate)

-Can you have the same degree of honesty and trust? (Select One: Yes, No, Depends or other—please indicate)

-Please comment on your responses:

6) Is a prayer via e-mail from someone you haven't met (such as someone from the OLC) as effective or meaningful as a prayer "in real time" from a friend or church member? Why?

7) Does your involvement in the OLC affect your relationships in your local church? If yes, in what ways?

QUESTIONS RELATING TO E-MAIL & INTERNET USAGE

8) Do you belong to any other Internet or on-line communities?

-Please list and describe briefly:

9) Why have you chosen to belong with the communities you belong to?

-Describe your involvement in those groups: (such as lurker, frequent poster, infrequent poster or other—please indicate)

10) If you have access to the Internet, what types of sites and

services do you regularly visit or use? (such as News, Business, Education, Entertainment, Religious, Sports, Hobbies, etc.)

11) Do you "talk" or communicate with people differently on-line compared with "real life"?

-If you do, please try briefly to illustrate what you mean.

12) How would your life be different if you didn't have access to e-mail/the Internet?

-If yes, in what way(s)?

=====
Any additional comments you would like to make:
=====

Do you give permission for your postings to the OLC from 9 November- 31 December 1998 to be cited in my research?*

*Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns about the use of your e-mail postings. (In my research the name of the community has been changed and any e-mail material which may be quoted will be attributed anonymously--I will not use your name).

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR TIME!

APPENDIX C

ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE—EMAIL QUESTIONNAIRE

Hello from Edinburgh!

Thank you for your willingness to share about your experiences using e-mail/the Internet and being part of the Anglican Communion Online (AC). Please take your time and add your answers the text of the questions in whatever way is easiest for you.

E-mail your responses to:

Heidi Campbell

(please note: this email address is different from the one this email is being sent from)

Heidi Campbell
University of Edinburgh
New College
Edinburgh EH1 2LX
SCOTLAND

QUESTIONNAIRE

=====
BACKGROUND INFORMATION
=====

Gender:

Marital Status:

Number of People in Household:

Age:

Profession:

City and Country of Residence:

Church you attend and location:

Are you actively involved in a local church/parish?

-In what ways?

Number of hours spent using E-MAIL each week:

What is your primary use of e-mail: (Select One: correspondence, getting information, building relationships, news, work, education, ministry or other—please indicate):

Number of hours spent using the INTERNET/WWW each week:

List the THREE WEB SITES you MOST OFTEN contact:

Level of technical background: (Select One: none, low, intermediate, high, professional or other—please indicate)

Do you take to new technology easily?

How do you feel about/see your computer? (Select One: a tool, a friend, a business-related object, used for entertainment or other—please indicate)

-Why?

Where do you get ACCESS to e-mail/the Internet? (Select One: work, home, work & home, library or other—please indicate)

QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION ONLINE:

1) How long have you been part of the AC? (Please give answer in years and /or months)

2) How did you learn about it and Why did you join?

How would you describe your contribution to the list?

How would you describe any benefits received from the list?

How would you describe your involvement/role in the list? (Such as lurker, frequent poster, infrequent poster or other—please describe)

-In one sentence summarise your experience in the AC:

3) Compare your participation in the AC with your participation in your local church. Is it a supplement, alternative, a temporary phase, a substitute, a bridge or other—please indicate?

-Please explain your answer:

4) Are your relationships on-line MORE intimate, LESS intimate or the SAME as compared with those you have with others within your local church/place you regularly worship?

-Please explain your answer briefly:

5) Do you believe that you care for members of an on-line community , such as AC, as you do in a "real world" (face-to-face) community? (Select One: Yes, No, Depends or other—please indicate)

-Can you have the same degree of honesty and trust?

(Select One: Yes, No, Depends or other—please indicate)

-Please comment on your responses:

6) Is a prayer via e-mail from someone you haven't met (such as

someone from St Sams) as effective or meaningful as a prayer "in real time" from a friend or church member? Why?

7) Does your involvement in the AC affect your relationships in your local church? If yes, in what ways?

QUESTIONS RELATING TO E-MAIL & INTERNET USAGE

8) Do you belong to any other Internet or on-line communities?
-Please list and describe briefly:

9) Why have you chosen to belong with the communities you belong to?
-Describe your involvement in those groups: (such as lurker, frequent poster, infrequent poster or other—please indicate)

10) If you have access to the Internet, what types of sites and services do you regularly visit or use? (such as News, Business, Education, Entertainment, Religious, Sports, Hobbies, etc.)

11) Do you "talk" or communicate with people differently on-line compared with "real life"?
-If you do, please try briefly to illustrate what you mean.

12) How would your life be different if you didn't have access to e-mail/the Internet?
-If yes, in what way(s)?

Any additional comments you would like to make:

Do you give permission for your postings to the AC from 30 May to 10 July 1999 to be cited in my research?*

*Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns about the use of your e-mail postings. (In my research the name of the community has been changed and any e-mail material which may be quoted will be attributed anonymously--I will not use your name).

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR TIME!

FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) How did you get involved in the Net? When & why did you decide to get Net access?
- 2) How would you define the word 'community'? How do you apply this idea of community to the online setting?
- 3) Describe your online relationships. What value do you place on them?
- 4) Have you ever met any of your online friends/contacts in real time? Did those individuals match your expectations or images you had of them?
- 5) Is there any overlap between your online and real world relationship networks?
- 6) How does Internet communication fit into your family life? Your real world friendships? Does your family/friends share your enthusiasm for the Internet?
- 8) How would you compare or link your church involvement to your involvement in this online community?
- 9) Do you think the Internet takes away or adds to your current and former involvement in the local church? The global church? Do you have any suggestion in how the church should or could integrate Internet usage into its life and practice?
- 10) Has your view of the church or Christian community changed through your involvement in the Internet? Through your involvement in this online community?

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