1-25-2023

Identity and Community in Digital Culture

Jeffrey H. Mahan

Identity and Community in Digital Culture

Jeffrey H. Mahan[1]

For some time, the news has not been good for congregations. The number of people who attend worship has been declining for at least fifty years. Gallup polls suggest that membership and participation have dropped 20% in the last two decades. Yet many congregations respond like the missionaries to Hawaii who insisted that converts to Christianity must wear wool underwear. They resist thinking contextually, keep doing what they have always done, and insist that to participate in Christian community newcomers must adapt to and invest in structures and practices that don't make sense in their culture. People who imagine that Christianity somehow exists outside of human cultures inevitably impose their own culture—as we have seen in the North American residential schools that insisted that First Nations children give up their culture, tribal identity, and language.

We are well into a massive cultural shift as societies long shaped by print and literacy adapt to a growing digital culture. Yet print culture's assumptions about identity and community continue to shape the lives of most congregations. Understanding how community and identity are experienced in today's fluid, digital culture points to new ways to join people on their spiritual journey.

Most of us still picture community as a village gathered around a public square where everyone knows their neighbor. There, religion is organized in stable parishes like the one disrupted by the arrival of a new and female priest in the British comedy *The Vicar of Dibley*. Nostalgically, we describe such congregations as being like families. They have existed over generations and have shared habits and understandings. Within them people know their roles, and in turn they are known and loved. That sort of congregation worked in a stable homogeneous society where people had clear and unchanging roles. There, identity was a matter of whom you identified with, of your place in the family, the workplace, or the congregation. Identity came from the group. However, it is almost impossible for most modern North Americans to think of their identity in this way.

In my first lecture I said that everything seems fluid in digital culture.[2] This is even true of identifiers we once assumed were predetermined by biology. Take race. In the US the census wants you to check a box: you are White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, or Indigenous. Increasingly, people resist. Race is a huge part of identity, but racial histories are complex, and people check multiple boxes or identify as biracial. Consider gender. It is not just biology; we understand it as a performance of deeply felt identity, and the rise of they/them pronouns confirms that its boundaries are less clear than they once seemed.

People also construct religious identities. Those who see the religious self as an ongoing construction assembled from insights and practices drawn from multiple sources don't take their religious identity directly from the faith community. Thus, life in a congregation seems but one option for how to practice their faith. That is a big change! Even

---

[1] Jeffrey H. Mahan holds the Ralph E. and Norma E. Peck Chair in Religion and Public Communication at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, and is a resident fellow at the Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado Boulder.

[2] See Mahan

those who identity with a particular tradition negotiate how they fit. They may claim the connection while nuancing church teachings they disagree with, saying, "I am Catholic, but don't follow Rome on birth control." Or they locate themselves theologically or ethnically within a strand of the tradition: "I am a low church Anglican," "I am a Swedish Lutheran," or a "I am a Black Methodist."

Here is an illustration of this individualized sense of religious identity: A Denver pastor is meeting with a couple who want their baby baptized. He shares the statement of faith their denomination asks parents to make. The young father points to a line that expresses a relatively high theological claim about Jesus' divinity, and announces, "I can't say *that*!" So the pastor helps the couple clarify what they believe and rewrites the baptismal liturgy to express what they can say with integrity about Jesus and what it means for them to follow him.

Both the pastor and I are pleased to have someone take the liturgy so seriously. Yet, notice what is happening. The tradition is seen as a collection of resources that individuals adapt to serve personal spiritual projects. This is a norm of contemporary religious life. People experience religious identity as a personal, malleable, and ongoing project. Stewart Hoover observes that in the current media age, the central task of religion has become constructing and articulating an individual religious self.[3]

Like identity, community is more fluid in digital culture. Forms of being the church that were shaped by stable print culture make less sense in a digital culture characterized by the ease with which information is created, shared, discussed, edited, and reused. When everything is in motion, people come to think of their identity and community as similarly fluid and under construction.

The pastor of a Chicago parish illustrates how congregations get stuck in fixed patterns of relationship that make it hard for them to adapt to a more fluid digital culture. He describes their neighborhood as experiencing racial change, the congregation losing longtime members as older folks die or move to be closer to family in the suburbs. New Black and Latino neighbors occasionally visit; they don't become regular participants. He asks rhetorically, "why is that?" To illustrate the disjuncture, the pastor notes that women in the congregation organize themselves in social and service groups called "circles." One is called the "Young Married Circle." Yet the membership of that circle is made up of women in their seventies and eighties, most of them widows.

His observation captures the richness of traditional communities and illustrates why change is difficult for them. Most of the women in the "Young Married Circle" have participated for 50 or more years. They raised children together, worked for mission, and buried husbands together. What a legacy of caring Christian community!

But imagine being a young woman of color who responds to the announcement that the "Young Married Circle" is meeting. The group doesn't deliver on what it promises about the age, marital status, and life issues of the members. If the visitor still wants to participate, she must break into long-established relationships and tease out the habits and attitudes shared by insiders. If the circle is a microcosm of the congregation, it illustrates why insiders love it dearly and why it doesn't feel welcoming to new folks.

Congregations are good at this traditional sort of community. They build relationships over time. Members tend to be of the same social class or race and to share

---

[3] Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

assumptions about the role of women and men in the family and community. They don't think of their practice of faith, and the theologies and values it rests on, as a choice but as the natural structure of the church. They have what sociologists call a *habitus*, a set of shared mannerisms, tastes, moral intentions, and habits through which they interpret their experience.

Congregations are not so good at change. A nostalgia for print culture idealizes the fixed community of the past. They have clear boundaries. New people enter slowly since they must adopt the habitus before they are fully accepted. Professor Thompson's work helps us identify the trauma and sadness that many congregations experience when this embedded habitus ceases to appeal to new people and the congregation declines.

As early as the late 1960s, sociologists realized that people's image of community was the stable village organized around the town square described earlier. But few of us lived there anymore. Seeking to make sense of what community might look like in a highly mobile society where impersonal strip malls replaced the village square, sociologists developed "social network analysis."[4] Rather than seeing community as rooted in spaces and places, they asked how people built and maintained social structures and connections and examined who is at the center and who is at the periphery of these relationships.

Think of a continuum that runs from the established, slow-to-change, traditional community at one end to the fluid, constantly changing social network at the other. The traditional community is maintained by deep and lasting relationships, it has clear structures of authority and accountability, and has fairly rigid boundaries. It also expects high levels of fidelity and commitment. In contrast, the social network is characterized by the ease with which people come and go. Its structures are loose and its borders porous; leadership is informal and relationships are easy to form, though they may not be as deep or lasting.

To clarify the significance of this change in cultures for congregations, imagine what religion looks like at both ends of the spectrum: The traditional congregation in the historic building on the village green, the one with a "Young Married Circle" of elderly widows, is made up of people with a long-shared history. Most members were born into, or married into, the congregation. There are designated lay and clergy leaders. Joining requires a formal process to learn their habits and confirm that you share their understanding of faith. They show up regularly, feel a sense of ownership and responsibility, make financial commitment to maintain the building, pay the staff, and support its programs. They happily join bible studies and service and social groups that seem to assume they will participate forever. They are sure they are welcoming, but their relationships are so established that there isn't a lot of social space for new people. To be accepted, you have to come regularly and take on the disciplines of the congregation.

At the other end of the spectrum is the networked faith community. The folks at AfterHours Denver[5] model how an ongoing faith community can reflect this looser online and offline style of relating. The networked faith community can also be spontaneous. Community is created when people gather to light candles, sing, and pray at the site of a tragedy or come together for short-term retreats or to build Habitat for Humanity houses. It is found in drum circles and dinner church groups. These folks know they don't live in a

---

[4] For a helpful overview of this theory see Valdis Krebs, "Social Network Analysis: An Introduction," *Orgnet*, http://www.orgnet.com/sna.html.
[5] https://afterhoursdenver.org/

settled village; people come and go. It is easy to join the network—in social media you just have to "like" a leader or community. They don't expect to be the only place that people will gather for worship, conversation, and service. The organizational structure is pretty loose. If you want to drop in they are glad to have you, and if you drift away they are not too concerned. They frustrate denominations that want to measure success in traditional ways. They don't have membership lists and may not have credentialed leaders. They recognize that people who are slow to give to maintain generic institutional structures can be generous in support of specific causes and projects.

Your congregation sits somewhere on this continuum. If it's like most congregations, you would probably place it toward the traditional community end of the spectrum. If you are an insider, someone who has felt treasured by your congregation and who sees membership as a significant part of your religious identity, you are probably glad this is the case.

It is hard for congregational insiders to understand why people who are at home in digital culture find traditional community old fashioned, a relic of print culture that they see as rigid and stifling. Our assumptions about how church "should be" are so ingrained that we can't imagine doing it another way. Understanding the shift in media culture begins to make sense of this.

Faced with the reality of congregational decline, radical cultural change, and our own desires and anxieties, what is a congregation to do? How does our location in digital culture shape our mission? The bad news is there are no easy answers; no single model or purely technological solution. The good news is that the Holy Spirit is at work where people are finding new ways to gather in God's presence. Congregations and leaders who are willing to do the work are networking with people around their spiritual question, albeit in ways that don't always look like the church as we have known it.

For a congregation to take its location in digital culture seriously, members must engage in two deep and ongoing conversations. First, they have to ask: Where are we located? Second, they have to ask: What is our mission? What the church will look like in the twenty-first century depends on your answers to these questions.

Mission asks: Who are we trying to serve? What is *their* cultural context? What are *their* needs and desires? How is the gospel good news for *them*? There is a dissonance when people who think about religious identity as an evolving personal construction are asked to fit into congregations rooted in a spiritual identity fixed by past histories. The congregations' desire to be the established center seems quaint and irrelevant. It is at odds with a digital culture in which people are in motion and communities and identities are under construction and reconstruction. Congregations and their leaders have to ask whether they are called to serve people who are shaped by digital culture and, if so, where and how they will meet them.

Not long ago, congregations gathered to celebrate Easter with its resurrection reminder that God is doing a new thing among us. It was exciting to have more people in the pews on that Sunday. Yet insiders are often piqued with those who "just show up at Easter or Christmas." Many pastors—including me—have expressed this from the pulpit. We grin and say, "you know, we do this 52 weeks of the year." But it is a little passive aggressive. We are saying, "your spiritual discipline seems thin." What if, instead, we take seriously their spiritual questions, desire for ritual, and quest for connection to something larger than themselves? Can we do that without acting like the answer is for them to adopt our habits and assumptions? Because maybe the resurrection isn't about building up our institutions.

What might congregations who seek to meet digital culture on its own terms do? I have a few suggestions about where to start. First, think about a variety of ways to network with people. Don't wait for them to come to you. Many of today's experiments in religious community go to the digital and physical spaces where people gather. For some this means meeting in bars or coffee houses, informal spaces where people are free to come and go. Others build online communities.

When visitors do show up where you physically gather, work on the ease of access. Signal that you are glad to have them on their own terms. Then act like you mean it. Worry less about building long-term programs and relationships. Consider the sort of flash communities that gather in response to tragedies. The mourning vigils with their candles, chants, and prayers outside residential schools where First Nations children died or at the sites of mass shootings aren't lasting, yet they are doing important spiritual work.

People also seem interested in short-term opportunities for service, companionship, and reflection. Learn from your experience with summer camp and retreats. Provide intense experiences that help people in and out of the congregation explore and deepen their spiritual identity and connection with others.

People who are exploring and constructing religious identity need a safe space for doubt and questions. Old models suggest that once people have the right beliefs they can join the church—and then be of service. But today belief is often worked out in practice. People figure out their religious identity by joining in actions of justice and mercy, by praying in the midst of doubt, and sometimes by drinking beer together and griping about the congregations they grew up in.

Print culture taught us that information flowed one way. Preaching assumes this: the preacher speaks, the congregation listens. Many congregations that have adopted digital tools treat them as amplifications of this one-way flow of information. But, as I suggested in the first lecture, whether online or f2f, information flows every direction in today's social network. If you blog or make a Facebook post and nobody extends the conversation, you have failed. In digital culture, each person is the center of a series of conversations. The church for digital culture gets this and creates lots of places for people to talk back and to each other. This requires new models of leadership, which we will turn to in my next talk.