

The New Connectivity: How Internet Innovations Are Changing the Way We Do Church

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by **Andrea Useem**

It's no longer news that the Internet has ushered in a digital revolution, reshaping everything from the business landscape to social relationships to personal habits. Our world today is profoundly new. And in these transformations, nothing is sacred. Just as newspapers find

themselves spiraling downward and corporations scramble to find an authentic online presence, so religious congregations are seriously impacted by the expansion of digital life. Yes, congregations have a unique purpose and mission, existing for divine purposes that can't be quantified or confined, but in the human realm, in the material world where the congregation plants its feet on the ground, change is sprouting up through the floorboards. These developments are challenging congregations to consider what it means to be a geographically rooted, brick-and-mortar congregation in a world of virtual cathedrals and online prayer groups, where intimate spiritual connection is possible at any time of day or night.

To make sense of how technology and church intersect, it's important to understand how the newest iterations of the Internet—collectively known as “Web 2.0”—dramatically expand our ability to connect with one another online. This new generation of Internet tools—including blogs, wikis, social networks, and video- and photo-sharing sites—has accelerated and enriched the online interaction first seen on e-mail listservs, discussion boards, and in chat rooms. Rather than being identified only by a user name while posting on a discussion board, for example, we can now create detailed “profile” pages on a social networking site where we post photos, champion social causes, and link to our favorite artists, politicians, or authors. Rather than simply consuming news and information online, we can post our comments about articles, or even publish our own online column, or blog. It is now possible to not only order an obscure out-of-print book online but also to find the five other people in the world who share an enthusiasm for that same book.

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“The Internet is increasingly embedded in our daily lives,” says researcher Heidi Campbell, a professor of communications at Texas A&M University and an expert on religion and digital technology. “Ten years ago not everyone had e-mail accounts. Now most of us find it almost impossible to function without the Internet, whether it comes to banking or doing business or keeping up with friends.” Religious life is no exception, she says. Although congregations increasingly rely on online tools to function day-to-day, technologically they are not moving as fast as individuals, who are increasingly going online to deepen and enrich their spiritual lives. Campbell finds that most religious congregations continue to plan communications “based on a written culture when we’re in a digital age.” The result is a culture clash in which religious congregations are having debates—Should we be online? Do social networking sites have anything to offer?—that individuals in the wider society have already resolved.

The essential challenge for congregations is this: In a digital world where community is possible online, what is the relevance of a brick-and-mortar congregation? The Internet’s success springs from a powerful longing for community—the very same force that drives congregations. Campbell points out, for example, that while the Internet began as a research network for scholars, it quickly became a social venue, a place for sharing interests and insights. In other words, if you are looking for a spiritual community, the church on the corner or even across town is no longer your only option. You could choose to participate in a religious community online, one that is “always on,” conveniently available in your own home, and potentially spanning the entire globe. In this new world of options, traditionally formed congregations have to define what makes them unique.

The good news here, says Campbell, is that congregational life and online life are not competing in a zero-sum game. If people go online to connect with other believers or deepen their faith, this activity does not mean a net loss for the congregation that those individuals might have turned to had the Internet not been available. In fact, Campbell says, the opposite is true. Her research and the research of others demonstrates that, overall, online religious activity leads people to become more involved with their local faith communities (see story, page 26).

The other good news is that even online-only communities gravitate naturally toward meeting in person. While some are now experimenting with virtual-reality worship services, like the Internet campus of the multisite LifeChurch.tv, most feel that ritual worship and sacraments can only take place face to face. Blogger Helen Thompson Mosher argues that congregations can take advantage of people’s “craving for community and physical interaction” by making real-world space available to those who organize themselves online. “It’s not so much ‘build it and they will come,’” she says, “as being the steeple around which people gather.”

Problems that Online Communities Solve

Ann Fontaine, an Episcopal minister and blogger in Wyoming, wrote about a recent experience by the Diocese of Wyoming to offer a well-known distance-education program, known as Education for Ministry, through Blackboard, an online utility used by teachers. “Originally we thought it would be great for rural isolated students,” wrote Fontaine in a June 2008 article for the website *The Daily Episcopalian*. “We have discovered that it is great for those who travel for work, those who live in cities and don’t want one more night out, those who have children at home, and snowbirds. The intimacy and depth of sharing is beyond my dreams. When we do find time to see each other in person, we are like old friends.”

Mark Brown, the New Zealand-based pastor of the Anglican Church in Second Life, a community that meets in the virtual world of Second Life, has found similar patterns in his own community. Through a survey, he found that 17 percent of those who attend the Anglican Church in Second Life attended no other church service offline. As one respondent to Brown’s survey shared, “I have been housebound for the last two years due to disability, so at present this is the only church service I attend.” Brown writes that the comment “highlights well the aim of the virtual Anglican Cathedral, which is ‘to be church for people wherever they are, whatever their circumstance.’”

The common thread here is that the Internet offers a new venue for spiritual interaction, worship, and learning in a way that overcomes boundaries of time and space.

“People are looking for relationships,” says Campbell. “They’re looking for places where they can care about people and feel cared for. They want a sense of connection, and not just on a Sunday. They want a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week connection to other people. They want an intimate community where they can be transparent with others and others can be transparent with them.”

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Campbell spent four years studying three online religious communities for her book *Exploring Religious Communities Online*. What she found was that while members of these groups did not abandon their local congregations, they were often driven to seek out community online because of needs unmet by those same local congregations. Some members of online communities told Campbell they simply felt “more cared for” online.

Campbell described her own experience at a church in Scotland to demonstrate this point. “In the middle of my research, I went to a Good Friday service at the Episcopal Cathedral in Edinburgh. I sat where I sat every week, but I left feeling very alone. Except for the passing of the peace, there was no social interaction,” she said. “After that, I tramped up to the computer lab at the theology school. I logged onto a chat room for one of the groups I was studying. Suddenly I was interacting with 14 or 15 people from all over the world, and we were praying together. Being there in the computer lab by myself, I felt

world, and we were praying together. Being there in the computer lab by myself, I felt very connected. And yet when I was at the church, surrounded by people, I felt very alone.”

The Online Church, one of the groups Campbell studied, existed almost entirely to provide emotional and prayer-based support for its Christian members, the majority of whom lived with sensory disabilities like blindness. The Anglican Communion Online, another group Campbell studied, offered an online community focused around a shared religious identity. A third community, the Community of Prophecy, was organized to help Pentecostals develop their gifts for prophecy.

By today’s Web 2.0 standards, the medium of communication for these groups was limited: members interacted primarily through e-mail. Yet in all three cases, the bonds of community ran deep. Members prayed with one another, sent encouragement, explored ideas, and shared life’s struggles; in addition, many made efforts to meet face to face, sometimes driving as much as 12 hours to make that possible.

What was most satisfying for members of these communities was something few offline congregations can offer: large groups of people who share similar interests or backgrounds. Members of the Online Church told Campbell the e-mail group’s strength was in being a community that “not only cares but understands what blind Christians in particular are going through,” as one member put it. In other words, a local congregation, which may or may not have blind members, may offer care for a blind Christian but would probably not be able to offer the same depth of understanding that Online Church members offered one another. Members of the Anglican group told Campbell they relished the chance to meet with others who cared deeply about theology and other issues of Anglican identity—a quality they sometimes struggled to find among members in their offline congregations.

Given the richness of this online community life, it is a natural leap to assume that these people spent less time at offline congregations as a result. Yet Campbell’s research found that the people who participated in these e-mail-based groups were not abandoning their local congregations. In some cases, she said, interacting online actually prompted people to return to or rediscover offline congregations. “If anything, it solidified their faith,” she said.

The news that religion online, in general, enriches rather than diminishes congregational life should come as a welcome relief to many who are ambivalent or fearful about the consequences of the digital revolution. This finding can help lead the conversation in positive directions so that religious leaders can explore these tools with greater confidence, searching for online utilities that will deepen and expand congregational life.

Connecting Strangers

While megachurches have successfully used the concept of “small groups” to channel members into locally based cells, often organized around demographics like age group or marital status, Web 2.0 technologies in many ways allow people to organize themselves.

Congregations can use these technologies to strengthen connections within an already existing community. Lisa Colton, founder and president of Darim Online, a nonprofit vendor offering website design and other technology support to Jewish institutions, gave the example of a large congregation that launched an online discussion board featuring a different topic each month and an experienced moderator drawn from the congregation. One month, says Colton, the theme was caring for people with Alzheimer’s disease, with a congregational member who was a geriatric psychologist serving as moderator. “Maybe nine people engaged with the discussion group,” she said. “These people probably had sat near each other in synagogue or had children in the same Hebrew class, but they didn’t know they all were wrestling with the same spiritual issues about caring for their elderly parents. The discussion group gave them a chance to support one another.” Colton said some of the discussion board members realized they had parents in the same nursing home facility, “and they would drop in on the other parents and post in an online message, ‘I saw your father today.’”

These affinities don’t need to be long-lasting to be meaningful, she added. “In five years, maybe most of those parents will have passed away, and the people may drift apart from one another because they no longer have that in common, but at that moment they were there for each other. In a congregation of 2,500 people, there are maybe five people dealing with your same issues,” she said. “The question is: How do you find those people? It’s very challenging. But the technology can make it easy.”

Hard Questions

It would not be fair to pretend that all the Web 2.0 news is good or easy to hear. While Campbell’s research lays to rest the idea that online connections will diminish offline ones, it also raises new and sometimes troubling issues. Campbell’s research reinforced a point made by Quentin Schultze, a communications expert at Calvin College, that technology is navigated primarily by individuals rather than larger social bodies like families. The result is a “networked individualism.” Whereas members of a single household perhaps once attended a single congregation together, now each member of that household, for better or for worse, is free to pursue his or her own individual religious interests. One person may read the blog of a well-known pastor, while another participates in a faith-based book club via e-mail with friends around the country and another searches online for information about other faiths.

To Allen Krauskopf, vice president for Internet services at Faith and Values Media, a New York-based media network, this individualism raises some hard questions about the nature of congregations. “Are we looking at the Internet as a force to strengthen congregations as we understand them today, or are we looking at the Internet as a force

that removes the congregation as a middleman and allows people to form communities by affinity? Those seem to me fundamentally different issues.”

To such questions, there are no easy answers, and each congregation must seek to hold onto its corporate values even while being flexible enough to respond to change.

Tomorrow's Tools

The current crop of Web technologies—popular sites like Facebook or YouTube or Twitter—are sure to be replaced in the near future, as the Internet continues to develop by leaps and bounds. Mastery in this environment is fleeting: as soon as you learn to blog, you may find that blogging is passé. This frenetic pace of technological change can seem too demanding, yet a congregation that ignores new technologies risks becoming irrelevant. Congregational leaders can survive only by leveraging the talents and skills of the people around them and by experimenting with new tools themselves.

Ultimately the tools of technology, like any instruments, must be subservient to the mission of the congregation itself: the horse comes before the cart. But be warned: these tools are so powerful and can take you in so many new directions that you may have an entirely new view of your mission once you're sitting in the driver's seat. Each congregation must try and fail and try again in what Missy Daniels, editor at the PBS show Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, called, “a spirit of experimentation” (see page 28). What congregations can bring here is one of their strongest assets: a sense of purpose and meaning, and the conviction that in the midst of uncertainty a higher power is the guiding force, able to absorb the frustrations and share the joys along the way.

The Parish Facebook Creating Congregational Connections Online

Brian Brunius had lived in Manhattan for 10 years, and he sometimes, but rarely, attended Mass at his local Catholic parish. “I would go in and leave. I would never hang out to talk or chat,” said the 38-year-old television producer and new-media consultant. At one point he put his e-mail address down on a church sign-up list, something he quickly forgot about. About three months later he received a parish bulletin in his in-box; his e-mail address, along with many others, appeared in the address list. “Within the next 24 hours I got about 30 ‘friend requests’ on Facebook from people I didn’t know and had never met,” said Brunius.

Brunius was already a member and active user of Facebook, the social networking utility that has rocketed to mass popularity since it was opened to a general audience in 2006. Members can automatically submit their lists of e-mail contacts to Facebook, which then displays which of those people are already Facebook members. “It turned out that all these people who ‘friended’ me were members of my parish,” explained Brunius. When

these people who ‘friended’ me were members of my parish,” explained Brunius. When his e-mail showed up on the mailing list, parish members were easily able to see that he had a Facebook profile. Brunius said “yes” to all the friend requests, a step that allowed him and his new acquaintances to view one another’s profiles, which include photos, tastes in movies, books, and films, and countless other opportunities for personal expression.

“Then this little dance started,” recalled Brunius. One of his new contacts would send him in an invitation via Facebook for a church event, a choir performance, or a committee meeting. At first he was unsure how to respond: he didn’t know if he was being invited personally or if the message sender had simply invited all of his or her Facebook friends. “But I found myself very likely to click ‘Yes, I will attend’ even though these were people I had never met.” He now found himself at church events, such as a Christmas concert he attended after receiving an invitation from a Facebook friend who was a choir member. “There’s no way I would have gone to some of those things if someone hadn’t invited me,” he said.

Brunius said he still doesn’t attend Mass regularly, but he goes more than he used to. Belonging to a parish, he said, “has become part of my identity again.”

“If I meet someone new at church, I go home and see if any of my Facebook contacts are friends with that person,” he said. Because Facebook shows users what friends you share in common with another person, Brunius sometimes discovers that a new acquaintance from church shares mutual friends with him. “When I see we have friends in common I feel some kind of connection, some sense of possibility. It draws me into their social circle.” Brunius said most of the friendships he has through Facebook with parish members have not yet evolved into deep or long-lasting relationships, but this limitation does not trouble him. “My life is full as it is, so I’m not really looking for new friendships. But now the parish has this tiny grab on me, not through the organization itself, but through each of these individual relationships.”

Brunius said he has also been surprised to discover members of his parish who live nearby. “My block in Manhattan has 17,000 people. My next-door neighbor might be a parish member, and I wouldn’t even know it,” he said. Some of the parish members who friended him on Facebook were people he recognized from his neighborhood. While they lived near one another, it was Facebook that finally helped them make the connection. Other Internet utilities work on the same principle: making it easier for people to find each other.

Although Brunius works professionally with new media, he said it was this personal experience that helped him see the power of online tools for congregations. “A lot of people have been afraid the Internet is going to be a closed space that isolates people and limits real human communication. For me the experience has been quite the opposite. I am hooked into a community I never knew existed. We had only this one small thing in

common: we were all on a mailing list.”

Getting Started with Web 2.0 Moving One Step at a Time

All of the talk about the world-changing aspects of Web 2.0 can bring a sense of urgency to your thinking about online technologies. While urgency is good, rushing is bad. One way to think about proceeding slowly is to build on what you already have. Anne Van Dusen, the late senior research associate of the Congregational Resource Guide, conceived of this as “Web 1.5.”

“Congregations shouldn’t lose site of their Web 1.0 assets, such as the all-important ‘front-door’ of your congregation: the website,” she said. “Many congregations already have online newsletters or digital church management systems. Think of Web 2.0 tools as additional tools for communication.”

Van Dusen suggested that congregations not only draw confidence from past successes in mastering once-foreign technologies but that they also begin modestly. A simple first step would be identifying a couple of blogs that would be relevant to your congregation and providing links in the online newsletter, she said, along with a quick introduction explaining what blogs are and why you think they would be interesting.

Introducing the topic of blogs in the congregation may bring resident bloggers out of the woodwork. Does your congregation currently have members who blog, either professional or personally? If so, consider linking to their blogs, or maybe asking them to write something for a congregational website or newsletter that they can also cross-post at their own blog.

This is the same type of advice management guru and Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen offers to struggling newspaper companies: figure out quick and easy ways to try out new technologies. For example, it takes about five minutes to set up a basic social networking profile. You can then search that network to see if members of your congregation or community are already there. If you discover that few others are on that network, then maybe it’s not the right “channel.” Try to figure out, then, what online or online-offline channels your congregants are currently using.

Another zero-cost investment is setting up a page on a free photo-sharing website like Flickr or PhotoBucket. When there’s a congregational event—a picnic or youth retreat, for example—ask people who are taking pictures there to upload some photos to that site, “tagging” those photos with a key phrase. Tags are simply a word or phrase attached to a piece of online content—whether a blog posting or photo or video—that make it easy for people to search and find that content. So if your congregation is called “The Islamic Society of Wichita,” you might ask mosque members to tag content with the phrase

Society of Wichita,” you might ask mosque members to tag content with the phrase “wichita muslims” or “ISW.”

If a tag is well-explained and congregational members start to upload content along with the tag, “a significant body of work develops that is associated with your congregation,” said Lisa Colton, president and founder of Darim Online, a Web strategy nonprofit for Jewish congregations and institutions. “If a 14-year-old girl goes camping on a youth trip and uploads her photos to Flickr, and I upload pictures with the same tag of my kids in the synagogue preschool, then after a while you easily get 300 or 400 photos,” she said. “These photos are taken from the perspective of the community, not from the perspective of someone who is trying to market the community. That’s a good way to distribute power and responsibility in a congregation.”

In the view of Rick Lord, rector of the Holy Comforter Episcopal Church in Vienna, Virginia, online technology is a place for exercising leadership. “Part of my responsibility as a pastor is to model moving across that [technology] threshold for my generation and the older generation,” said Lord, who started his own blog, “World of Your Making,” four years ago. At the same time, even making an attempt to master social media can have an important impact on those who already participate in it, he said. “People can say, ‘Well, gosh, if Rick can learn how to use Facebook, then maybe there is hope for this congregation. I just might be able to relate to this guy because he knows the language that I speak, and he knows how to use the technology that I use.’”

To Helen Mildenhall, a blogger and manager of the faith-based website Off the Map, congregations should embrace new technologies “to give people a platform to do what they want to do, and are already doing, and will do elsewhere if you don’t give them the opportunity.” Without making that leap, she asked, “Will there be a church when the 50-year-olds are gone?”

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