

# Virtual Church

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Thank you for giving me some time to talk to you about my current research at today's Virtual Church conversation. I'd like to spend this time presenting some theoretical considerations about this virtual church phenomenon, partly as a response to Alistair Macrae's presentation, and partly as a way of thinking about the practical examples that come after me. In this respect, while Alistair focussed on the "Church" aspect of "Virtual Church", I'd like to talk more about the "Virtual" side, and what that means in our language and in our religious experience.

My research is primarily concerned with how expressions of "Virtual Church" is impacting on offline religion in Australia, and the place of religious institutions in public discourse about religion in general. I'm tracking the development and expansion of the "emerging church" movement in Australia as a case study, mainly because I see the movement being almost totally Internet-driven. While "emerging church" conversations are happening in congregations, communities and denominational sectors, the best vehicle for the establishment of these conversations as a movement, across denominations and traditions, has been the Internet, and blogging in particular.

I'm only into my fifth month of the PhD course, so by no means do I want to come across as an expert in this field. Instead I would like to pose some arguments for you to think about and feedback to me, so I can learn from your experiences. These four months have mainly been background reading, and there are two sources that I wish to draw heavily from. Peter Horsfield, who is my senior supervisor in the course, presented a paper to the *Trans-Tasman Virtual Theology Colloquium* in Auckland in January 2005, titled "Virtual Theology". The other work is by Heidi Campbell (2005) "Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage." *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, <<http://online.uni-hd.de>>.

## Theoretical approach

I'd like to present just one theoretical approach to thinking and talking about virtual church. I contend that how we talk about the Internet and other forms of communication impacts on the ways we use these technologies. The metaphors that we apply to computer-mediated communication (CMC) – world wide web, cyberspace, virtual world, information superhighway, etc – determine our understandings of these technologies, and how we integrate their use into our daily social lives.

This theory does not apply just to CMC. Consider the introduction of radio. At the time of its invention, the only other technology available that could transmit a message from one point to another, without carrying a physical object to contain the message, was the telegraph. A message was sent from one point across a network of wires to another specific point. It was only natural that radio was termed "the wireless telegraph".

However this metaphor constrained people's thinking about radio, and its usage. Radio was used to transmit messages from one origin to one specific destination. When developers realised that on message could be sent to numerous receivers simultaneously, a new metaphor needed to capture the technology's use. Broadcasting was adopted, taken from the earlier suffragette campaign of pamphlet distribution.

Likewise, the metaphors that we apply to the use of CMC like the Internet, and the social context in which we use them, such as church, determine how we approach the technology and talk about it with others. The rest of this presentation will be looking at metaphors we apply to both CMC and to church, and how they impact on our attitudes toward virtual church, and what we see when we enter virtual churches.

## Metaphor: "virtual"

"Virtual", especially when associated with the word "reality" has different connotations for different people. For many it would be set in opposition to "real". Something that is virtual is not real, is only an illustration, an illusion, or a taste of what is real. So for many, virtual church would imply that it's not "really" church, that it's only an image or a taste of real church. I believe this definition is unhelpful, firstly because it denies the experiences of community, belonging, faith development and mission that many of

us have had in online faith gatherings. Secondly, we may argue that church is itself is virtual, in that it is only a taste of the Kingdom, or an imperfect expression of the “true” body of Christ, an illustration of what church is meant to embody. We may argue that all expressions of church could, and maybe should, be viewed as virtual churches.

A more helpful understanding, I believe, would be to set the word in opposition to “actual”. In this sense “virtual reality” would mean that part of reality that does not include material elements, or occupy physical space. Virtual reality is not complete reality, actual reality, but is also not constrained by the physical.

All cultures have used media to construct virtual worlds to help interpret experiences and choices; it is not new to CMC. Fifteen years ago members of congregations who found themselves marginalised by their beliefs would find belonging in virtual communities generated by televangelism. Viewers would pray with the televised audience, send letters and donations to their favourite speakers (who would often reply), and meet with other devotees in local and regional conferences and meet-ups. Five centuries ago members of churches who felt marginalised by their beliefs would congregate in town squares and homes to hear the latest news reports and be read propaganda against the Pope and decide to take part in the reforming of the European church. Even further back, paintings on cave walls indicate the grand story of dreamtime by which our earliest ancestors found their place in the generation of the cosmos.

In all these cases, and in our own case discussed here, virtual reality is not separated from daily life, but continually intersected with actual reality. Our understanding of meaning within reality is born in a constant process of virtualisation and actualisation. “The War on Terror”, the children thrown overboard, the rise to power of Nelson Mandela, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, the loss of Azaria Chamberlain, and the picture of a happy lion on our box of Frosties, all make sense to us as we construct our own interpretation of reality, somewhere in between the actual events we experience and the virtual worlds we create.

Horsfield suggests that this sense of “virtual” created by Internet technologies is important for the following reasons:

- \* It allows for creativity
- \* In being a creative space, it allows for exploration of new potential and limits
- \* It provides safety
- \* It offers hope and meaning, even when events in the actual world threaten our hope and meaning-making
- \* It allows for play

### **Metaphors of Internet that influence its use for religious purposes**

Being on the other side of the planet, our common knowledge of the Amish mainly comes from American movies, which tell us they are a people who reject modern technologies. This is not exactly true. Campbell recalls that the introduction of the telephone into Amish communities was not rejected outright. Instead, seeing the home telephone as a means of fostering individualism and threatening household living, the Amish chose to forbid the use of them in private homes. However telephones are placed in community centres where groups of people can communicate with other Amish groups around the countryside. Thus for the Amish, the telephone is a means of connecting communities.

For Campbell, how religious groups and individuals identify and describe technology is determined by, and determines, their usage of the technology. In her article she tells of her research into how different religious groups understood Internet technology, and identified four different metaphors. Each metaphor attributes a certain way in which the Internet is used. I will only outline them here; click [here](#)<sup>1</sup> to read the full article.

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<sup>1</sup> If you're reading this on paper, obviously the link won't function. This is the URL - <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2005/5824/pdf/Campbell4a.pdf>.

Metaphor	Usage
Spiritual medium	Creation of online religious networks
Sacramental space	Creation of worship spaces and ritual designs
Tool for evangelism	Dissemination of religious materials
Technology for affirming religious life	Dissemination of liturgical and meditative resources and encouragement of new forms of religious expression

## Metaphors of church that influence the use of the Internet

More important to my research at this point is the question: How does one understanding of church impact on their creation of, or involvement in, virtual church, or religion online? After a very short survey of online religious content I can identify three ways in which “church” may be described, and this has produced different online expressions.

### 1. Church as place.

The notion of church as a geographic location, building, or meeting point is expressed online in a variety of ways – from graphic interfaces to chat rooms. Examples include [www.churchoffools.com](http://www.churchoffools.com), where a visual image of the inside of a church frames the movement of graphic avatars, and a variety of conversation networks, called chat rooms or cafes (borrowed from the 1970s-present café church model). In these sites the focus is on the creation of a “virtual” space, where symbols mark points of entry, departure and movement, and sound and vision is important in creating a sense of being *in* a virtual environment. Language employed in the text is also intended to imply that the user is “in a place”.

### 2. Church as institution.

Sites such as [www.hillsong.com](http://www.hillsong.com) and the Uniting Church site at [victas.uca.org.au](http://victas.uca.org.au) offer a shop-front to resources, materials and people in an organised institution of religion. The design of these sites is not meant to create a sense of being “in church”, but of access to information.

### 3. Church as movement.

For those who view the church as a vehicle for social change, or as an organisation that needs to change itself, the use of CMC takes a different form. Here the focus shifts from user/audience to the site’s creator, where the web site employs sound, text and imagery to promote a search for identity, belonging, and a quest to identify the world or context in which it is situated. Blogging has become an accessible and useful form for this to happen, where bloggers can place a thought into the ether and hope for, or expect some response. The result is the creation of an online community of bloggers.

Clearly this not by any means a complete or exhaustive overview of online or virtual church, and a continued survey is needed. It may be also a little on-sided to suggest that one’s view of, or metaphors for, church or religion will determine how an individual or a group would use the Internet. It is arguable that one’s use of CMC for religious purposes will impact on how they view and talk about religion. CMC, like all media, has the power to change our notions about all facets of living. It will be some time before we have fully comprehended how much Internet technology can develop and influence our lives, and that impact will not just be online; it will affect all our relationships in the offline world too.