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“Virtual Incarnations: An Exploration of Internet-Mediated Interaction as Manifestation of the Divine”

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*‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’
But how are they to call on the one in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?
And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?
- Romans 10:13-14*

Efforts to proclaim the Gospel and make Christians within the United States during most of the last century occurred synchronously, as religious beliefs and practices were embedded in the life of the faith community, and social norms functioned - formally and informally - to support Christian values. Blending religious and secular conversations, Christian evangelists and catechists actively sought to pass on a faith nuanced within denominational and congregational mores. As Story-Keepers retelling the history of God’s intervention for salvation and Story-Makers making God present within the faith community and within the world, new members and longtime adherents grew in faith primarily by participation in it. Typically serving as a cultural center, the church was structured to be more than the place to gather for Sunday Services. Active church members also met there during the week and weekend for fellowship, Bible study and faith sharing, opportunities for prayer, guidance and healing, as well as time for social and outreach activities. Fashioned within a communal space and supported by fellow members, relationships deepened as individuals in a faith community prayerfully engaged with challenging ideas and issues, gained a vision of life greater than themselves, and went out into the world seeking to create and enact it. The whole environment – an ecology of faith – was in operation.

In the twenty-first century, time is short and this ecology is broken.¹ Today, as post-colonial and postmodern sensitivities lead to increased respect for the diversity of religious and spiritual expressions, as well as non-church perspectives, Christians cannot (and likely should not) assume reinforcement of their unique religious values in secular contexts. Correlatively,

¹ Episcopal priest and religious educator John Westerhoff first explored the web of relations (community, family, public school, church, religious periodicals) that worked as an educational ecology to form people of faith and heralded the implications of a broken ecology in his 1976 book, *Will our Children Have Faith*.

myriad other opportunities compete for attention, particularly on Sunday mornings. Many who would like to be active in their church simply cannot. Adults and youth alike experience the tension of conflicting expectations and values as the work week extends well into the late evening and weekend, and school sports are often scheduled on Sunday mornings. Challenged to find one hour to attend Sunday worship, it is unlikely that they will participate in activities interspersed through the week. Forfeited are opportunities to hear the Gospel and learn of Jesus' way; lost are times to share life stories and to make meaning of them together through the lens of faith and community.

Without occasions for faith community members to meet, relationships diminish, outreach weakens, and God seems more distant. This has an unintended consequence: growing rosters of inactive members. Estimates suggest that in addition to approximately 15% of the United States population that does not claim a faith affiliation, between 30-40% of those baptized no longer practice their faith.² At a time when community members could most likely benefit from the support and care of a faith community, they have less ability to do so. The church – as individuals and as a corporate body – suffers when individual members are not able to be in relation.

In response to the loss of a coalescing community center where members meet physically and support each other spiritually and emotionally, many church leaders are looking outward, beyond the church walls, to identify ways to meet the needs of God's people and support them in their faith practices. Feeling the need to be creative in the face of the seismic shifts in contemporary culture, some are reevaluating their stance toward new forms of interactive technology. Rather than assume that all activities will occur in *physical places*, these communities are exploring the potential of using Internet-mediated communications to create *virtual spaces* for everything from Bible Study and theological discussions to virtual worship.

² John Roberto discusses the changing patterns of religious identification using statistics from the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey and the April 17, 2009 Faith in Flux Pew Research Survey in his "Description of Thirteen Trends and Forces Influencing the Future of Faith Formation in an Changing Church and World," *LifeLong Faith Journal* (Vol 3.2 Summer 2009) 36.

Some Christians lament this move. One of their most widespread critiques is the disembodied nature of online relationships. Whether citing fears of engagement with others who misrepresent themselves or defending the need for physical, particularly sensory engagement, many argue that online worship is not “real” and contend that computer and Internet-mediated communications should not be incorporated into religious education and faith formation. While these and other issues particular to virtual environments must be addressed, the wholesale elimination of Internet-mediated communications from theological education and Christian formation discards a significant resource.

Based on personal experience and commentary from ministers who, as early adopters, are evangelizing and catechizing in virtual spaces, I see mounting evidence that God is present online. Framed by Karl Rahner and Catherine LaCugna’s understandings of the Trinity and the significance of the Incarnation, this paper investigates the process by which we come to experience the incarnate God through personal relationships and faith-sustaining practices. Building on the belief that God is known ontologically through God’s self-communication and revelation in the economy of salvation, I will show how Internet-mediated interaction can, and does, manifest the Divine. The Metropolitan Community Church’s Sunshine Cathedral and the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life serve as virtual exemplars demonstrating how life in a virtual world can replicate “real” life as individuals and communities seek to know and recognize God’s presence. Naming these Internet-mediated experiences of the Divine “*virtual incarnations*,” I will explicate the ways a virtual church can be an appropriate environment not only for information sharing but also for personal and communal formation and transformation. Paralleling transformations initiated by Gutenberg’s printing press, the Digital Age is heralding evolutionary and revolutionary change in almost every aspect of life. To prepare for the inevitable ecclesial ramifications and to prompt future conversations, I conclude this exploration by identifying what I believe is *the* pivotal question facing 21st century Christians. Explicitly framed by the frequently repeated question, “Is virtual church real?,” I believe the implicit question is “Is God present?”.

Although a full exploration is beyond the scope of this paper, my hope is to provide educators, pastoral leaders, and faith communities access to the conversation which until now has been largely limited to those active in virtual worlds. My goal is to challenge us to prayerfully discern our individual and collective responses to this brave, new, albeit virtual world.

An Incarnational Lens

For over two thousand years, members of the Christian community have struggled to understand and articulate the mystery of God, particularly as expressed in Jesus, the Christ. Formulated in the Gospel according to John as “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14) and defined by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE as “perfect both in his divinity and in his humanity,” contemporary Christians name this central mystery of our faith the Incarnation. Derived from the Latin term *incarnatio*, the term Incarnation translates easily: “to enter into or become flesh.” Comprehending its meaning and significance for us as God’s creation is far more complex.

Although my current affiliation and practice is as an Episcopalian, I have been deeply influenced by my Roman Catholic formation and training. My understandings of the related doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Trinity rely especially on the articulations of Roman Catholic theologians Karl Rahner, SJ and Catherine LaCugna. After outlining their theses, I will explicate how an incarnational lens may assist those responsible for religious education and faith formation to embrace Internet-mediated communications.

Rahner’s Axiom

One of Karl Rahner’s (1904-1984) most significant contributions is his seminal work, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*.³ This book is grounded in an analysis of human beings as positively-oriented toward the mystery we name

³ Rahner’s *The Trinity* (NT: Herder and Herder, 1970) set the agenda for most contemporary Trinitarian theologies; *Foundations* puts Trinitarian theology within a more systematic exploration of Christian faith. An excellent companion text to Rahner’s *Foundations* is *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner’s Theology*, ed. Leo J. O’Donovan (NY: Crossroads, 1989).

“God.” Rahner begins with human experience, as he posits exploratory questions and seeks systematically to introduce Christianity’s key tenets. His chapter on Jesus Christ presupposes an evolutionary view of the world, and moves to explore the relationship between matter and the spirit. His goal is to understand the relationship between, and more particularly the unity of, the human and the divine. Using a dialectical framework that includes delineations of *transcendental potential* and *historical concreteness*, Rahner claims that the intrinsic nature of matter is to develop toward the spirit. Thoroughly grounded in modern thinking, he describes transcendence as a *process of becoming*, of reaching and achieving a greater fullness of being, a leap to something essentially higher. He contends that becoming is not limited to creation, but also occurs for God. As such, God *became* (distinct from creation), God *became Word* (a distinct expression of God within Godself) and God’s *Word became Human* (God as known through Jesus, the Christ). When combined, the highest phase of self-transcendence (creation reaching to God) is identical with an absolute self-communication of God (God reaching toward creation). Thus, the hypostatic union - the fusion of humanity and divinity - shows how God’s utter self-expression and self-communication through Jesus is the “definitive climax and radical closeness to the mystery we call God,” and “the necessary and permanent beginning of the divinization of the world as a whole.”⁴

Rahner’s pondering on matter and spirit, self-transcendence and self-communication, human and divine, culminated in a Trinitarian axiom that radically rejuvenated theological expressions about God and reunited the relationship between human experience of revelation and salvation. Rahner argues that, “the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity.”⁵ Colloquially translated, the economic Trinity is “God-for-Us” and functions as humans recognize God’s presence in the history of salvation while the immanent Trinity is “God-for-Godself” and refers to human speculation about God’s interior

⁴ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Theology: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, (NY: Crossroads, 1987) 181-197.

⁵ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 22.

dimensions. By linking them, Rahner argues that theological references to God's self-communication are not about something God reveals *about* Godself, but rather what God *is*, grace. For Rahner, this is ontological, not epistemological, and highlights the significance of the Incarnation. With Jesus, God is embodied and embraces all of creation – graces all creation.

Rahner defines this process of *embodiment* as both *transcendental revelation* and *categorical revelation*. For Rahner, transcendental revelation is the general presence of God which permeates all of creation, often in an *unobjected*, intangible way through our consciousness. In contrast, categorical revelation is historical and concrete. It is God as expressed in words, events, and peoples. It is the biblical record of God's special saving history. The two-fold process of embodiment recognizes that 1) God in Godself is relational, and that relation motivates God's self-expression that humans name grace, 2) that God is decisively present in history as gratuitous love and utter self-gift, and 3) at a concrete point in history, God embraced all of creation by literally joining it in material form as a human person, Jesus the Christ. As delineated, the doctrine of the Incarnation is not simply that God became flesh (human) in a historical moment as recognized in God's embodiment as Jesus the Christ, but also that all creation both manifests God's presence and orients toward God. Rahner claims that concrete human living embodies a transcendental hope, and that the incarnation is the embodiment of God's response to that hope. Thus, ordinary activities of learning and growing in self-knowledge already involve the presence of God, who enables, guides, and fulfills them.

Framed by Rahner's explanation, we can appreciate how we become our fullest selves as we move toward our fullest potential as represented in Jesus the Christ. Our experiences, shared, recorded, and retold over the course of centuries, reveal God's love and plan for that fulfillment which existed from the conception of the world. God's presence is not confined to a single moment; we recognize God in all creation. In addition to God's tangible presence in Jesus Christ, creation reveals God through mediated forms.

LaCugna's Expansion

Rahner's insights began a radical revitalization of Trinitarian theological inquiry, inspiring new efforts that include the work of Catherine Mowry LaCugna. Moving from Rahner's German original and expanding upon it for an English speaking, predominantly United States audience, LaCugna's *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*⁶ charts the evolution of the Doctrine of the Trinity to show how theologians gradually lost the unification of economic and immanent understandings and shifted focus from God's actions in human lives (economic) to speculation of God's relationships within Godself (immanent). She shows how the early church's human experience of God's presence in their lives as creator, savior, and spirit initiated the debates which culminated in the Chalcedon statement of the doctrine of the Trinity. Over time, she shows how God felt more distant and inaccessible to humans as the medieval understandings of God focused on a psychological model of God in Godself. She correlates this with the period's growing practice of using mediators to maintain access to God by praying through saints and other liturgical aids. By focusing predominantly on the inner life of God (Augustine's parallel of divine persons as memory, intellect, will), LaCugna contends that the church lost sight of God as revealed in salvation history, of God's concrete and tangible presence. Subsequently, the Christian community lost their ability to relate to and connect with God.

Spurred by a contemporary ambivalence to Trinitarian theology and claims that "the doctrine of the Trinity was defeated,"⁷ and thus meaningless, LaCugna expands Rahner's axiom and rebalances the primary understanding of the Immanent Trinity (God-in-Godself) with the obscured notion of the Economic Trinity (God-for-Us). By revisiting early church views of the doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Trinity, she sought to rediscover the essential truths of

⁶ Grounded by and expanding beyond Rahner's Trinitarian axiom that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa, LaCugna also wrote two essays condensing her exploration of the Doctrine of the Trinity: "The Trinitarian Mystery of God," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives, vol 1*, ed Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Glavin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) and "God in Communion with Us: The Trinity" in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed Catherine LaCugna (NY: Harper Collins Publishing Inc, 1993).

⁷ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, San Francisco. (NY: Harper Collins Publishing, Inc., 1993) 9.

Christian faith and reestablish consistency of human articulations about God with Scripture, creedal statements and liturgical practices. With Rahner's idea that God is self-communicating as her premise, LaCugna maintains that God's self-expression models right relations for and with creation; that God's desire to reveal and give Godself as well as to be united with other persons establishes how we are to relate to God, self, others and all creation. She correlates God, God's life with us, and our life with each other, such that Trinitarian theology is a "theology of relationship."⁸

This relational ontology, which she assembles from Greek and Latin patristic and medieval theology, as well as from contemporary philosophy, theology, and culture, contains the elements of "an ontology of persons in communion."⁹ In addition to the mutuality, reciprocity, and deep intimacy this suggests, LaCugna uses "communion" as a metaphor that represents the blending of economic and immanent understandings of the Trinity and serves to shift our perspective of God's reign. Parsing the Greek root of economy (*oikonomia/oikonos*) which means household, LaCugna suggests that we imagine the ultimate conclusion of the Christian story of salvation as the "household of God," a more inclusive metaphor than the Kingdom of God. In this household, intimate relationships develop such that "the life of God and creature exist together as one."¹⁰

I argue that the metaphor of communion is eminently appropriate to the deepest meaning of the economy as the place where God and creature meet and unite as persons in communion. The idea of communion integrates the 'psychological' emphasis of the Western tradition (the soul created in the image of God) with the more 'social' theme of communion favored in the East. But instead of adopting Thomas Aquinas' idea, taken over from Boethus and with roots in Augustine, of person as an individual who is self-possessed in self-knowledge and self-life, I describe person in terms of relation to another: *to be a person means to choose oneself through another.* (emphasis added) The emphasis on the person as image of God affirms the prominence of anthropology in the doctrine of God... the relational character of the person highlights that the image of God is to be found in ecstasies and self-transcendence through relationship with another.¹¹

⁸ *Ibid*, 243.

⁹ *Ibid*, 14. First identified in the introduction, this concept is explained in detail in Chapter 8: Persons in Communion.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 377.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 14.

With the fully human and fully divine Jesus Christ as a model and guide, creation understands what it means to reach for the perfection which God intends for it: right relations.

The climax of LaCugna's *God-for-Us* is this correlation of the reciprocal relationship between self-communicating beings and the affect of such self-communication. The doctrine of the Trinity properly understood, LaCugna argues, affirms God's intimate communion with us through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit; however, this is not *just* about God's self-communication. The doctrine of the Trinity properly understood also considers our response as the recipients of God's saving, self-giving, self-communication.

For Christians, this occurs through a radical reorientation of life choices to follow the Way – Jesus' Way- and to give glory to God not only in prayer, but with our whole lives. Ultimately, we come to recognize the fullness of the mystery and presence of God as we share intimately with others. This fullness of human relations makes present the divine and reflects the fullness of the divine made present in Jesus Christ. As delineated by Karl Rahner and Catherine LaCugna, *this* is the significance of the Incarnation. Jesus Christ – perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity, transcendent revelation and concrete revelation – is God and is the Way to God. It is only by practicing the Way and becoming the way – wholly orienting ourselves toward others in ever-deepening mutual relations and striving toward the establishment of the household of God – that we can begin to appreciate the Divine in our midst.

An Incarnational lens reminds us that God not only became enfleshed, literally, in Jesus the Christ but also that God becomes enfleshed in us, God's creation, as we become the perfection God intends for us through other-oriented self-communication. No longer physically present for us to interact with personally, God-for-us is revealed and known to us through the community-based relationships we have with others. Our interactions - one-with-another, reveal God-with-us. Thus, as Story Keepers, Christians make God present every time we repeat the stories of our faith and remind each other of the future God intends for creation. As Story

Makers, we become God's Gospel reinterpreted and proclaimed in our words and actions. This is a relational model; coming to know God depends on human interaction – sustained, critical, dialogical interaction,¹² with one another and with a faith community's texts, traditions, rituals, symbols and artifacts. Engagement in the whole ecology of faith serves as a crucible for personal conversion and social transformation and opens individuals and communities to a continually expanding appreciation and acceptance of God's grace. Inspired by God's self-gift and motivated to respond in kind, individuals and communities are led to incarnate God for others. As Christ's body, our mission is to create the household God intends, and in the process reach our full potential by embracing the salvation God promises. As we embark into the 21st century, the challenge for faith communities is to find forums for these God-revealing relations.

Virtual Incarnations

The introduction describes contextual challenges religious educators and pastoral leaders face. We can no longer presume that faith community members can or will hear stories of faith by physically attending church services or by participation in faith formation activities. This significantly impacts the community's ability to provide forums in which individual members and the community feel God's presence, hear God's call, and engage God's mission. Recognizing that individuals and communities can interact without being physically proximate, some early adopters of Internet-mediated technology are exploring its use to offer virtual spaces in which these interactions can occur. The Internet is no longer simply a channel to deliver information via static web-pages. With the continuing advances in digital media and increased public access, the inherently interactive Internet is *becoming* a whole environment for multi-directional, multi-sensory engagement. Internet-mediated communications such as web-based

¹² Introduced in my dissertation, sustained, critical, dialogical interaction designates one avenue by which we come to know and recognize God's presence in our life – incarnated by our relationship with another through the Holy Spirit. Examined individually, each word describes the covenant we must make if we hope to *fully become* the creation God intends for us. *Sustain* imparts two important meanings: to nourish and to maintain over time. Ideally offering both simultaneously, sustained critical dialogical interaction presumes a *life-giving* quality to *continuous* engagement through and reflection upon human interaction. *Critical* refers to the *careful disciplined analysis and judgment* that guides the interaction; *dialogical* is a deeply self-revealing, mutual way of knowing; and *interaction* describes the *reciprocal action*.

conferencing, social networking, and immersive environments are blurring the boundaries between the “real” world and virtual ones.

Confronted by declining participation in Christian communities and increasing potential for meaningful interaction through Internet-mediated communication, church leaders find it natural, and even imperative, to explore whether or not and how Internet-mediated interaction can reveal God’s presence online. Naming these Internet-mediated experiences *virtual incarnations*, I will show how Internet-mediated interaction can, and has, manifested the Divine. To do this requires some explanation of Second Life (SL), the largest and most popular virtual world available online. Building upon anecdotal evidence as well as research exploring religion online, I offer two exemplars of SL virtual churches: the Metropolitan Community Church’s Sunshine Cathedral and the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life. Replicating “real” churches in form and function, they demonstrate that virtual reality is no longer a potential future. It is here, now, as seen in Second Life, and it is spurring discussion of what is required for a church to be a “real” church.

Second Life

Second Life is a 3D virtual environment originally conceived as Linden World in 1991 by Philip Rosendale (aka Philip Linden), Linden Lab CEO and founder. Curious about the ways humans could manipulate their world, he launched a beta version of a virtual world in November 2002 that publicly went live in July 2003. In 2003, Second Life was “running on just 18 servers with barely 1000 dedicated users.”¹³ This jumped to over 300 servers and 8 million residents by September 2008 and reached over fifteen million residents in September 2009. It appears that this rapid growth resulted from a strategic design decision. Rosendale’s team of developers initially developed Second Life with video-game like qualities. As they saw the benefit of enabling users to create their own worlds and experiences, they changed both technology and

¹³ Michael Rymaszewski, Wagner James Au, Mark Wallace, Catherine Winters. *Second Life: The Official Guide*. (Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing Inc, 2007) iv. Also, <http://lindenlab.com/pressroom/general/factsheets/lindenoverview>.

user policies to enable greater user freedom. This also influenced Second Life's evolution to more closely resemble real life, sometimes called "First Life" by SL residents.

Thankfully, most of Second Life's technology is invisible to users, who access their virtual life by logging in using a utility downloaded from www.secondlife.com. They can become "residents" in Second Life for free (basic membership) or pay a monthly fee (premium membership) which lets them to buy and develop "land" – pieces of Second Life's virtual property. Residents create individually stylized avatars¹⁴ to represent themselves with personally designed bodies, physical movements, gestures, and clothing. Freed from societal and physical limitations of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, or geography, there are many outrageous avatars; still, most residents depict their idealized self or experiment with who they would like to become. Communication can be private, between two residents, or public for anyone in a virtual location via instant messaging or activating a computer microphone.

Whether or not they own land, residents claim a home in a region which is locally governed and agree to abide by six SL standards for public areas. Called "the Big Six," all residents must avoid: intolerance, harassment, assault, disclosure, indecency, and disturbing the peace.¹⁵ Additionally, rules limit activities available in some regions, like the separate teen grid for 13-17 year olds, and there are rating designations (i.e. mature) to alert residents to activities they may find in a particular region. Beyond that, residents can engage in every conceivable form of commerce using Linden dollars. Free to choose any form of self expression so long as it is mutually agreeable, avatars can explore realistically displayed 3D landscapes and develop new regions, watch films at movie festivals, learn in educational institutions, participate in sports, visit art exhibits and museums, imbibe at bars, or engage in sexual activity.

Within this mix, some residents have created environments for spiritual seekers and religious practitioners. Avatars can light virtual candles for Shabbat, teleport to a Buddhist

¹⁴ Ironically, avatar is from Sanskrit Avatara meaning incarnation. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_\(computing\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(computing))

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 15-16.

temple, consult an oracle for divine guidance, or join a virtual church. Two Christian expressions of virtual churches are the Metropolitan Church's Sunshine Cathedral built on Blessed Island and the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life built on Epiphany.

Sunshine Cathedral

The first Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) virtual church was envisioned by the Rev. Robert Griffin and launched in February 2009 by the Rev. Brenda "BK" Hipsher¹⁶ (aka SL CristoferAslan Muircastle). Contracted by the leadership of the MCC Sunshine Cathedral of Fort Lauderdale, FL, to serve as virtual chaplain, Hipsher leased land from the Koinonia Community on Blessed Island and built the SL Sunshine Cathedral. Intent on making a welcoming, inclusive, spiritual home, Hipsher collaborated with Senior Pastor Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins and



FIGURE 1: Sunshine Cathedral exterior and worship area at dusk - taken at 11 pm ET/8 pm SL..

¹⁶ In the interest of full disclosure, I led "BK" through two directed readings and informally worked with her during the 2005-06 academic year as she completed her thesis "Anti-oppression and Feminist Pedagogies for Online Feminist Liberation Theology Education." She earned her MATS degree from the Episcopal Divinity School in 2006 and will return in the Fall 2009 to begin our Doctor of Ministry program.

other staff to design their multipurpose spiritual counterpart. Intentionally designed with places for prayer and worship, guidance and healing, learning and formation in the same building, the cruciform church, shown in Figure 1, places a glass-roofed circular worship area as the heart of the church in the crossing. Juxtaposing stained-glass windows with more modern video displays, the entrance incorporates elements of the RL Sunshine Cathedral in Florida including a webcast of the weekly sermon, links to the weekly newsletter, video meditations, and ways to financially support real life ministries. To the right of the center is the Learning Center alcove with comfortable chairs and a widescreen video display; to the left of center is an alcove for informal gathering with more comfortable chairs and a fire burning in the fireplace. A permanent display on the church facade in the courtyard welcomes visitors and invites them to click on the screen to learn of service times which also introduces them to the Cathedral community:

Welcome visitors to Sunshine Cathedral of Second Life!
We are a Metropolitan Community Church affiliated with the Center for Progressive Theology. The RL mother church is located in Ft. Lauderdale, FL, USA. This is an outreach program of that congregation and we welcome you to SC in SL.

Join us for services: Saturday 2pm SLT (Remember: SLT is Pacific time US.)

Join the group "Sunshine Cathedral in SL" to receive service reminders. Visit <http://www.sunshinecathedral.org> for more information on Sunshine Cathedral in RL. Visit <http://www.mcccchurch.org> for more information about Metropolitan Community Church. IM CristoferAslan Muircastle in SL for more information.

Clearly linked with its Fort Lauderdale RL counterpart, SL Sunshine Cathedral is grounded by the Core Values of the Metropolitan Community Churches:¹⁷

- **Inclusion** - Love is our greatest moral value and resisting exclusion is a primary focus of our ministry. We want to continue to be the conduits of a faith where everyone is included in the family of God, and where all parts of our being are welcomed at God's table.
- **Community** - Offering a safe and open community for people to worship, learn and grow in their faith is our deep desire. We are committed to equipping ourselves and each other to do the work that God has called us to do in the world.
- **Spiritual Transformation** - Providing a message of liberation from the oppressive religious environment of our day or to those experiencing God for the first time is

¹⁷ http://sunshinecathedral.org/about_us/mcc_core.htm

what guides our ministry. We believe that when people are invited to experience God through the life and ministry of Christ, lives will be transformed.

- **Social Action** - Working to talk less and do more, we are committed to resisting the structures that oppress people and standing with those who suffer under the weight of oppressive systems, being guided always by our commitment to Global Human Rights.

Abbreviated here, the particular mission of Sunshine Cathedral is based on their articulation of “Answering the Call.”¹⁸

- *We are* answering the call to live and model a progressive spirituality by offering worship that is open to all people, regardless of what they believe...
- *We are* answering the call to live and model a progressive spirituality by offering affordable, adult religious education...
- *We are* answering the call to live and model a progressive spirituality by offering intercessory prayer, free of charge, for anyone who requests it...
- *We are* answering the call to live and model a progressive spirituality by offering ministry to local Assisted Living Facilities, correction facilities, and a rehabilitation center....
- *We are* answering the call to live and model a progressive spirituality by speaking out for justice....
- *We are* answering the call to live and model a progressive spirituality by saying that at Sunshine Cathedral, every member is a minister and every ministry is a team....
- *We are* answering the call to live and model a progressive spirituality by Sharing the Light with the World! (via broadcast sermons on the Internet, members living in Jamaica, a booklet of daily devotionals, etc).
- *We are* answering the call to live and model a progressive spirituality by celebrating who we are, engaging the world in which we live, by affirming the sacred value of all people, and by living in the power of indomitable hope. We call our spirituality progressive, positive, and practical and we invite you to join us in this progressive, positive, and practical way of conscious living!

A relatively new church, SL Sunshine Cathedral lists 46 members and 3 chaplains.

When interviewed¹⁹ about her ministry as Virtual Chaplain for the SL Sunshine Cathedral, BK gets animated. She identifies it as a mirror image of “real life” with all the problems, challenges, joys, and opportunities of a new church plant. She sees little difference between “first life” and “second life’s” spiritual longings and ethical dilemmas and reports that as CristoferAslan Muircastle, her avatar form, she feels “more present” and

¹⁸ http://sunshinecathedral.org/about_us/we_are.htm

¹⁹ I interviewed BK in my office during one of her visits to EDS on August 25, 2009.

“more intimate” with those she meets.²⁰ Asked to expound on how this is true, she talked about how she believes avatars function in what she calls a “relational matrix:”

We are relational beings. We operate within a relational matrix with boundaries and structures. In Second Life, there is no expectation to reveal first life descriptors. If someone does, it is because they freely choose to do so. There are fewer assumptions. Our avatars represent specific entities who mutually agree to share either through text and voice or in their profile.

Avatars reflect what people are in real life – who we wish we were and who we hope to become. Avatars rarely reflect that which is antithetical to oneself. Through conversation, we understand more fully how the avatar reveals what someone feels about themselves.

Whether in church or visiting a pub, CristoferAslan presents as a priest in clerical black with a white collar, as shown in Figure 2. Conscious of her role as minister, BK’s avatar communicates a religious affiliation and a willingness to engage in meaning-making conversations. Though particularly true in her worship space, BK’s goal is to extend



Figure 2: CristoferAnslan Muircastle and the Rev BK Hipsher

hospitality to all wherever she meets them. She engages deeply whether talking with “regulars” and “newbies.” Modeling the types of relationships she hopes to inspire, she is eager to offer help. Implicitly providing an experience of God’s self-giving love, she explicitly works to support

²⁰ Raymond Gozzi introduced this concept in an article titled “Anonymous Intimacy” in *et Cetera*, October 1, 2005. He used it to describe how “MASS MEDIA offer us a strange experience where we see and hear various intimate details about the lives of people we do not know.” More recently its use has been expanded to include Internet-based interactions where a veil of anonymity releases inhibitions and more intimate details are shared in casual conversation.

them as they grow into the beings God intended for them. To illustrate the types of life-changes she has witnessed in her ministry, BK talked about one of the many faith-inspired extended conversions she had with Zenda that led to transformations in both her “real life” (called First Life/FL in SL) and in SL:

When I originally met Zenda, she presented as a young woman with orange spiked hair, wide hips, ragged clothes, thick black boots and exaggerated facial expressions which telegraphed “f**k you.” She always rode a Harley and when she stood next to you, it was as if she had no awareness of personal space. Without fail, if she saw me, she immediately launched in to a diatribe about some thing or another, never asking if it was a good time for a lengthy conversation. She was obviously struggling with a lot of personal issues. Whether she chose it intentionally or not, her name means “Holy” but she did not seem to feel holy. We’ve been in conversation all year. One day, I suggested that she try a going to a SL group that blends faith commitments with social justice. Soon, she told me she came out as a lesbian within the group and with the support of her virtual friends, was able to start sharing this truth in her real life. In learning about what it means to act on behalf of others, she seems to be more at peace with herself and has found her vocation as an activist. This internal transformation has had implications with her avatar’s presentation. I’ve watched as she has modified her hair and chosen more professional clothes. Her features look softer and she seems more willing to listen. Still, some things don’t change. She still rides her Harley.

CristopherAslan and Zenda’s relationship provide an example of LaCugna’s incarnational notion of God seen through relationships as communion: “*to be a person means to choose oneself through another.*”²¹ Through her relationship with CristoferAslan, Zenda could claim her vocation and her more authentic self in both SL and real life; her avatar graphically depicts this conversion. Illustrative of the types of relationships that can occur online and modeling the type of sustained, critical, dialogical interaction I described, their relationship represents the manner in which virtual relationships can inspire someone to “become” (in the Rahnerian sense) and to reach toward the fullness of their humanity. In so doing, they each recognize and embrace God.

Like the relationship between Zenda and CristoferAslan who regularly visit in Second Life, online relationships have the potential to manifest the Divine. However, like their First Life counterparts, new church plants in Second Life require time so that participants can shift from

²¹ LaCugna, 14.

casual participants to active members and committed leaders. In Hipsher's experience, Second Life is a space most people go to during their "free" time. Although it is hard to predict what will be true for future generations, this generation does not use SL as the world they live in. As a result, one of the challenges she faces is finding a means to provide a community context that enables participants not only to feel ownership, but also to grow in faith and commit to some action both within the church and the larger world. While not a unique concern for any pastor building up a new church, a virtual church requires extra effort to get them in the door. First Life residents are typically aware of the pattern of worship available on Sunday mornings (i.e. 9 AM service); generally speaking, Second Life residents are not. Hipsher speculates that this may be because their causal engagement makes them less conscious of places to worship and the times of their services. It could also be that they are confused by time differences (SL is based on Pacific Time). Regardless, Hipsher noted that she feels added pressure to attract community members by sending reminders to affiliated members the night before, an hour before, and 10 minutes before worship begins at SL Sunshine Cathedral. Whether participants become more proactive as the church becomes established remains to be seen.

Anglicans of Second Life

If the experience of Anglicans of Second Life (AoSL) is an indicator of virtual churches after three years of existence, it is clear that individuals can and do engage in a wide variety of meaningful religious and spiritual experiences, become committed members of the community, and serve on the leadership team. Although there are no stories posted on the blogs that record AoSL history that convey the type of intimacy and transformation revealed in Hipsher's story of Zenda, I believe they can be assumed to occur as evidenced by a growing community, an expanded leadership team, and an enticing vision of the way they could bring God to people in this new virtual reality - wherever people are, whatever the circumstances.²²

²² February 9, 2008 Letter to the Head of the Anglican Church in Australia, The Most Reverend Dr Phillip Aspinall, Archbishop of Brisbane

The history identifies Bill Sowers (aka SL Rocky Vallejo) of St David Episcopal Church in Topeka, KS as the founder of “Anglicans of Second Life.”²³ Hoping to gather for prayer and fellowship, the group’s November 2006 charter stated that it is “A Christian community for those who call themselves: Anglicans, Episcopalians or members of the Church of England, Episcopal Church or any of the other bodies of believers who share the Anglican heritage.”²⁴ After the Rev. Mark Brown (aka SL Arkin Ariantho) joined the group of 15 residents in February 2007,



Figure 1. Anglican Cathedral in Second Life, exterior and nave.

they decided to plant a church and develop the idea of a virtual chapel.²⁵ With some resemblance to Durham Cathedral in England, the Gothic-inspired Anglican Cathedral in Second Life (AoSL), shown in Figure 3, was constructed between March and May 2007.²⁶ In June 2007, Epiphany Island was dedicated to Anglican Ministry and the Cathedral was moved to its permanent home. The island has been continually under development and now includes everything from worship spaces and a meditation garden to a labyrinth and Conference center.

²³ <http://slangcath.wordpress.com/about>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ The Rev Mark Brown, “Christian Mission to a Virtual World,” April 2008, http://brownblog.info/wp-content/plugins/wp-downloadMonitor/user_uploads/Christian_Mission_to_a_Virtual_World.pdf An ordained Anglican priest affiliated with the Diocese of Wellington, NZ, Brown was the Virtual Chaplain for AoSL from 2007 until July 2009. Brown also has served as the CEO of the New Zealand Bible Society from January 2007-March 2010.

²⁶ Ailsa Wright (aka SL Helene Milena), “Anglicans of Second Life - some reflections on lived experience,” (April 2009) 12. http://www.phil-wright.net/ailsa/AoSL_paper.pdf. An AoSL Leadership Team member, Ailsa’s profile offers: “I preach and lead services there and also offer counseling and pastoral care and prayer for those who want it.”

As is typical of the weekly bulletin emailed to group members and posted at the Cathedral, the notice of Services and Activities for September 5-11, 2009²⁷ provides instruction, lists the week's activities and identifies leaders for each offering:

Each service is held at the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life. The service is usually offered in text and voice format and where a message is preached, it will be in audio (and sometimes text) format. After the service we have a time of fellowship where you can meet people from around the world. If you are new to Second Life you are most welcome!! The service and activity times are given in SL Time (which is the same as Los Angeles).

- **SUMMER SCHEDULE CHANGE:** The Saturday Discussion Group is on hiatus for the summer, as Group Leader Arundel Dragonash prepares to move in order to begin her doctoral studies in the Fall.
- **A Bible Study** meets on Sundays at 11am in the Conference Center (in the courtyard area behind the Cathedral). This week's bible study will be led by Helene Milena (Ailsa Wright).
- **Saturday Worship** - Saturday 8pm - Led by LouiB Serendipity.
- **Sunday Worship** - Sunday 12 noon - Led by Gareth Janus (the Rev. Gareth Edwards).
- **Compline** - Sunday 6pm - Led by Hildegard Psaltery (the Rev. Brenda Monroe).
- **Tuesday Worship** - Tuesday 2pm - Led by Helene Milena (Ailsa Wright).
- **Wednesday Worship** - Wednesday 2pm - Led by Gareth Janus (the Rev. Gareth Edwards).
- **Wednesday Worship II** - Wednesday at 6:30pm - Led by Caoilin Galthie.
- **Thursday Worship** - Thursday 2pm - Led by Helene Milena (Ailsa Wright).

If you have an interest in taking a more active role in our ministry we would love to hear from you! Inside the cathedral is a volunteer box listing many roles which you might be interested in. Do pop in and fill out a notecard and we'll get back to you to discuss with you further how your gifts might be used within our community. Alternatively contact Helene Milena at ailsa [at] ailsa-wright.net.

Today, 15 officers and 13 welcomers support over 641 participants²⁸ from more than 20 nations.²⁹ This type of comprehensive approach parallels a large parish in First Life.

²⁷ 2009-09-04 20:26:54 note card copied from Second Life

²⁸ Once a group member, participants can open their personal profile and click on group descriptions to view a list of group members, roles, and abilities. These numbers were taken from the AoSL description Sept 1, 2009.

²⁹ Rev Mark Brown, "The Digital Revolution and the Church," (December 2008) 4. http://brownblog.info/wp-content/plugins/wp-downloadMonitor/user_uploads/The_Digital_Revolution_and_the_Church.pdf

Not tied to a particular church, like Sunshine Cathedral, AoSL seeks to uphold the values of the Anglican Communion, the juridical authority for the international association of Anglican and Episcopal churches. Posted on April 24, 2007, AoSL states that:

Our vision is to build an Anglican church in Second Life which:

- is grounded in worship and prayer, seeking to be a bridge between our rich Anglican heritage and contemporary society.
- gives those involved in Second Life an opportunity to explore or deepen their faith in God, who loves them and seeks a relationship with them.
- encourages Christians from different countries and theological persuasions to work together to the glory of God.
- is a community which welcomes and serves others, and is known for love and care.
- is recognized as an integral part of the worldwide Anglican Communion.³⁰

The same posting includes a detailed explanation of their core values. Based on the four-point Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral which started as an Anglican definition of what it means to be Christian, they use it to define their Anglican identity.

- The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as “containing all things necessary to salvation,” and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
- The Apostles’ Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.
- The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself — Baptism and the Supper of the Lord — ministered with unfailing use of Christ’s Words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.
- The Historic Episcopate locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.³¹

Repeating a phrase from Richard Hooker’s description of the “Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity,” the core values concludes with a statement that decision-making is guided by what Anglicans and Episcopalians commonly call “The three legged stool,” Scripture, Tradition and Reason:

This means that we look first to the Bible for answers, taking the plain meaning of what is written. If the meaning is not absolutely clear we use reasoning, i.e. common sense. If there is still some doubt, the traditional interpretation established over the years is accepted. Scripture, tradition and reason should work with one another, with Scripture having precedence. To this mix, personal experience is often added as an additional source of understanding. All should be grounded in prayer.

³⁰ <http://slangcath.wordpress.com/the-vision/> (April 24, 2007, Mark Brown)

³¹ *Ibid.*

Taken together, the Vision and Core Values statements, along with the blogs which record AoSL history, clearly demonstrate the ways in which the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life is seeking to maintain ecclesial ties with the Anglican Communion. The AoSL blog in particular identifies initial members of the leadership team and highlights Mark Brown's involvement from voluntary leader through diaconal ordination and licensure³² in Wellington, NZ, on November 17, 2007, to priestly ordination November 22, 2008, and resignation from AoSL in July 2009. It recounts ongoing conversations with the Rt. Rev. Dr. Thomas Brown (Wellington, NZ), the Rt. Rev. Christopher Hill (Guildford, UK), and Rupert Bursell (Ecclesiastical Law Society). Although clearly prohibiting sacramental worship, the blog identifies the successful efforts of community leaders as they provide seasonally appropriate worship in what has developed into seven different services. It also documents the addition of a bible study, discussion groups, lecture series, art exhibits, one-on-one pastoral care, garden and labyrinth meditations, and fellowship.

The potential for interaction is high for visitors and members of the AoSL. The Leadership Team has creatively integrated a variety of synchronous (live, at the same time) and asynchronous (delayed, posted for others to engage as they can) Internet-mediated tools. In addition to the live chat and voice interaction on Epiphany Island and the official blog for the Anglican Cathedral, visitors can post comments to the semi-official *Brownblog* and an assortment of blogs created by committed members and supportive fans. Through these, I found evidence of a community trying to maintain its core values while being transformed both in its practice and its self-understanding.

Two and a half years of archives provide glimpses of maturation, as individuals and as a community, from an initial efforts to build and promote the concept of virtual church to a fully established multidimensional faith community. Blog postings from 2007 reveal a more self-

³² Within Anglican Church polity, one becomes a priest by virtue of ordination. A priest is licensed to perform priestly functions within a specified judicatory (geographic area) and is bound through canonical obedience to follow the area's prescribed laws.

focused evangelistic enthusiasm. Early posts log administrative and organizational details of what is required to launch and maintain a new church plant and chronicle a celebration of “firsts” experienced by members of and visitors to AoSL. There is also a significant amount of self-promotion by the virtual chaplain Mark Brown mixed in the catalog of recorded presentations and sermons. This noticeably begins to shift about January 2009.³³ The posts include a change in tone and a greater variety of topics and authors. In addition to theological reflections on the Saint of the day and the Scripture for the week, AoSL leadership is also asking their community to engage in a discussion of foundational understandings and fundamental beliefs.

Virtual Theology (Cady Enoch, June 24, 2009, <http://slangcath.wordpress.com>)

As I noted in my recent post about the leadership transition at the Cathedral, we continue to have the interest and support of those bishops of the Anglican Communion who have been working with us on formalizing our standing within the wider church. There will be a follow up meeting to discuss these matters held in the UK in July. Part of this work will involve taking a look at the theological issues surrounding the expression of Christianity in virtual worlds. We have gotten off to a great start with Rev. Mark’s blog post on the [conversation about virtual sacraments](#). Below are some of the other questions that have arisen so far. We would really like feedback from the community on these questions, and want to know what questions you have that we haven’t thought of yet! I encourage you to share your comments here!!

- What do you think are the most important questions facing SL Christians?
- What harms us spiritually in SL?
- What can help heal us, help us and help us understand the gospel in SL?
- To what extent does online life and culture allow us to behave in ways that would not be acceptable in RL?
- What do you think are the most important theological questions facing the Anglican Cathedral in SL?
- What does it mean for the cathedral to be Anglican?
- What can you do in a RL church that you cannot do in a SL church?
- Are we really “gathered” when we meet online?
- What is the function of a virtual place of worship?
- What is the relationship between worship in a RL faith community and worship within SL?
- What is the role, if any, of evangelism in SL?

³³ In July 2009, Mark Brown stepped down from his leadership role. Although there is speculation regarding Brown’s advocacy for virtual worlds that push ecclesial boundaries as well as potential differences within the leadership team, the AoSL announcement of Brown’s departure lists the reason as “increasing time demands in other areas of his life.” (<http://slangcath.wordpress.com>, April 21, 2009, SL Cady Enoch) Brown provides a few more details on his blog: “This decision is brought about due to increasing time pressures in my personal and professional life including a growing family and new responsibilities within my work and ministries.” (<http://brownblog.info/?p=803>, April 18, 2009, Mark Brown).

As the community is becoming more reflective, they are asking tougher questions. When they ask what it means to be church and how to relate to the world, they are implicitly exploring what it means to make God present and be God's presence. This is beginning to stretch the church, both in First Life and Second Life, to reconsider the boundaries of Christian life in each the physical world and an Internet-mediated one, and to recognize how each environment reveals God's presence.

What is Real? Incarnational Thinking in First Life and Second Life

Conceptually, the topic of "virtual church" seems to have reached a popular culture tipping point in the past year, as questions about its efficacy are appearing with increasing frequency. Implicitly and explicitly exploring whether or not and how God is present, some of the concerns are named generally. Writing from New Zealand in a *Brownblog* posting on May 30, 2009, the Rev. Mark Brown wrote that the question he gets asked most often about the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life is "How can a church online be a real church?"³⁴. Similarly, writing from Canada in her blog *In My Lifetime*³⁵ on August 16, 2009, the Rev. BK Hipsher (CristoferAslan Muircastle) wrote about "doing" virtual church and invited readers to share their responses to the question "What is Church?". Greater anxiety appears as the focus narrows, particularly with respect to the place of sacraments online. Mirroring elements of Rahner's juxtaposition of concrete revelation and transcendent revelation, most of apprehension originates in divergent theological premises.

On June 22, 2009, Brown posted a short paper by the Rev. Dr. Paul S. Fiddes, on "Sacraments in a Virtual World?" In it, Fiddes affirms the potential for online sacraments

An avatar can receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist within the logic of the virtual world and it will still be a means of grace, since God is present in a virtual world in a way that is suitable for its inhabitants. We may expect that the grace received by the avatar will be shared in some way by the person behind

³⁴ The Rev Mark Brown. "You don't seriously think that online church is real church!?" (May 30, 2009) <http://brownblog.info/?p=858>.

³⁵ The Rev. BK Hipsher <http://inmylifetime.typepad.com/>

the avatar, because the person in our everyday world has a complex relationship with his or her persona.³⁶

A few days later, the Rev. Bosco Peters, also based in New Zealand, extended the conversation in his blog “Liturgy: Worship that Works – Spirituality that Connects” by reposting Fiddes’ essay.³⁷ It must have hit a nerve because he reported that “about 200 people an hour are reading the article - over seven thousand have read it so far!”³⁸ As a counterbalance, he added his own commentary discouraging “Virtual Eucharist”:

Baptism, immersion into the Christian community, the body of Christ, and hence into the nature of God the Holy Trinity may have some Internet equivalents – for example, being welcomed into a moderated group. But my own current position would be to shy away from, for example, having a virtual baptism of a second life avatar. Nor would I celebrate Eucharist and other sacraments in the virtual world. Sacraments are outward and visible signs – the virtual world is still very much at the inner and invisible level. Similarly, in my opinion, placing unconsecrated bread and wine before a computer or television screen and understanding this to result in consecration tends away from the liturgical understanding of the Eucharist (liturgy = work *of* the people/ something done by a community) towards a magical understanding of the Eucharist (magic = something done *to* or *for* an individual or community). The majority Christian position (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican/Episcopalian, Lutheran - but, it is to be noted for this response, not Baptist) holds that Christ is truly present in a distinctive way in the Eucharistic species of bread and wine. A sacrament requires particular “matter”. Baptism uses water, Eucharist uses bread and wine. ... There is within Christianity a minority position that regards sacraments as primarily something happening in one’s mind, or metaphorical heart. This position holds that the bread and wine are reminders to the faithful person receiving them.

These blogs represent well the spectrum of positions regarding sacraments in Second Life.

In addition to these and other blogs, a number of church publications have spurred debate as well. Calling the church to embrace the Internet as a missionary field in the July 25, 2008 edition of the United Kingdom’s *Church Times*, the Rt. Rev. Christopher Hill (Anglican Bishop of Guildford, NZ) both reaffirmed that the sacraments *required physical engagement* while also challenging readers to consider the possibility for a “*spiritual communion*.”³⁹ In the United States, a flurry of editorials and comments were posted after the Rev. Lisa Hamilton’s

³⁶ <http://brownblog.info/?p=886>

³⁷ <http://www.liturgy.co.nz/blog/virtual-eucharist/1078>

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=60742>

essay “Worshipping Online: Is it really Church?” was published in the October 6, 2008 edition of *Episcopal Life Online*.⁴⁰ The essay was fairly balanced, blending commentary by supporters and detractors of both virtual church and virtual sacraments, and leaving readers to assess their own position. Still, most of the resulting rebuttals pushed the extremes. The exception was an editorial explaining AoSL’s intent by Mary Wanamaker (aka SL Cady Enoch). Published on March 11, 2009, Wanamaker’s “Expanding The Faith: Internet Church Not Intended To Replace Brick Version” called for a hybrid combining Internet-mediated elements with attendance at a “real” church. As a member of the AoSL Leadership Team, she explains the Leadership Team’s objective for the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life and its demographic realities:

Our intention never has been to replace the "face-to-face" worship experience with the virtual. According to a recent survey conducted among our community members, more than 80 percent of us also are actively engaged with our local faith communities. We enjoy, and are nurtured by, the opportunity to engage in worship and fellowship with other Christians, many of whom we never would have the opportunity to meet in person, as our membership literally spans the globe. As for the members of our community who are not members of a local church, many simply do not have access to one, often due to cultural or geographical constraints or health issues.⁴¹

These postings and essays, and the commentary that goes with them, highlight the tension churches are facing in the 21st century. As pastoral leaders begin to explore the potential of meeting seekers and longtime adherents in virtual worlds like Second Life, faith communities need to consider fully the benefits and limitations of moving online. We also need to reflect on the theological, ecclesiological, and pastoral implications, and prayerfully discern a response.

Whether questioning the relational possibilities of virtual self-representations as avatars, ecclesial boundaries of churches in a virtual environment, or worship practices in a medium that is only aural and visual, I believe “What is church?”, with its correlative theological and pastoral implications, is *the question* of this generation. As we fully embrace the possibilities and

⁴⁰ http://www.episcopalchurch.org/79901_101368_ENG_HTM.htm. I was quoted in Hamilton’s essay saying “Here we are, an incarnational tradition, and along comes the disembodied nature of the Internet.” Taken out of context both in the essay and the subsequent flurry of comments posted thereafter, my quote has been used to affirm that virtual church cannot be “real.”

⁴¹ http://www.episcopalchurch.org/80050_105818_ENG_HTM.htm.

implications of the digital age, the church will change. My intent has been to initiate a sustained, critical, dialogical interaction between and among religious educators and pastoral leaders so that we can influence an appropriate advance into a new virtual world. The first phase is recognizing that God's presence can be and is being felt by digital immigrants (those who did not grow up with computers and internet-mediated communications) and digital natives (those who did) as they establish other-oriented relationships in virtual spaces. The next phase, and likely the most contentious, includes conversations about whether or not and how ecclesial bodies recognize God's presence signified online (i.e. in virtual sacraments). Church leaders are just beginning this conversation and the tension is evident. AoSL leadership publicly states that they will not celebrate the sacraments online and while their blog postings explore the possible form and function of virtual Sacraments. In the hope that we will proactively join the dialogue, I offer brief summaries of two insightful resources.

Stephen O'Leary "Cyberspace as Sacred Space"

First published in 1996, Stephen O'Leary's essay "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks"⁴² is widely heralded as one of the earliest essays to explore the implications of Internet-mediated communications for religious institutions. O'Leary uses a theoretical framework built on the work of Walter Ong, who studied the relationship between innovations in human communication and cultural evolution.⁴³ After revisiting the formative aspects of orality, hand writing, mechanized printing, radio and television, O'Leary turns to consider networked computers. Predicting that transition to the Digital Age⁴⁴ will initiate a liturgical evolution parallel to the one which resulted from the simultaneous introduction of the printing press and the Protestant Reformations, O'Leary

⁴² Stephen O'Leary "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996) 781-808. I am using the slightly edited and republished version from *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan ed. (NY: Routledge, 2004) 37-58.

⁴³ O'Leary, *Religion Online*, 38.

⁴⁴ Various conventions are used to name four eras of human communication. O'Leary, based on Ong, uses Oral, Written, Print and Electronic/Digital. To distinguish between broadcast and multidirectional media, I choose to name them Oral, Written, Mass-Mediated (mechanized print, radio, television) and Interactive (telephone, the Internet).

broadly parses the differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant meaning-making. He starts by showing how the theology of the Roman Catholic Church enabled the spoken word to retain a magical efficacy through a type of “performative utterance”⁴⁵ whereby “the sacramental theory of language affirms the essential unity of signifier and signified.”⁴⁶ For example, believers hold that the words of institution, “This is my Body,” when performed by a duly ordained priest, literally make bread the Real Presence of Jesus Christ. In contrast, O’Leary shows how “the liturgical and cultural forms of Protestantism direct attention inward; the preaching of the Word, conceived and embodied textually rather than sacramentally, was meant to induce an interior conversion of sin that was prerequisite to the experience of grace.”⁴⁷ O’Leary’s juxtaposition between a Roman Catholic lens that hears the Word as an actual vehicle of God’s presence and grace, and a Protestant lens that hears the Word as a directive or analogy, points to a spectrum of potential responses when individuals participate in community rituals and practices both offline and online. Focused on the latter, he offered insights gained by studying the early CompuServe forums (pre-Internet virtual spaces for interaction), particularly ones that met at preordained times for prayer and Scripture study. Though “chat room”⁴⁸ interaction in 1994 was limited to text, he found that most participants were “actually engaged in collective devotions, much as they would at church or in a Bible Study group”⁴⁹ and provided a “more intimate connection” than he had realized.⁵⁰ O’Leary explicitly chides conventional ethnographic approaches and implicitly challenges researchers and practitioners to think outside their paradigms.

As Barbara Myerhoff puts it, ‘Rituals are conspicuously psychological:
witness their behavioral basis, the use of repetition and the involvement

⁴⁵ J. L. Austin is the founder of speech-act theory which identifies a class of communicative “acts in which saying the words does not merely describe an existing state of things, but rather creates a new relationship, social arrangement, or entitlement. *Ibid*, 42.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 41.

⁴⁸ CompuServe chat or conference “rooms” are an early version of what is more commonly known as Instant Messaging.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 46.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 47.

of the entire sensorium through dramatic presentations employing costumes, colors, textures, odors, foods, beverages, songs, dances, props, settings, and so forth.” If scholars maintain this understanding of ritual, they can only be led to the conclusion that rituals in cyberspace are simply ‘unreal,’ that their significance never transcends the virtual plane. However, one should be cautious of such an easy dismissal. Certainly, important elements of traditional ritual are lost without physical presence, but perhaps we should invert the question. Rather than assuming preemptively that the loss of physical presence produces a ritual that is unreal or “empty,” we might ask what ritual gains in the virtual environment and what meanings the participants are able to derive from these practices.⁵¹

O’Leary’s arguments lead us to consider the power of performative language and the function of practitioner’s belief⁵² in determining the efficacy of virtual interaction. Thus, applying O’Leary’s insights to an analysis Second Life practices, the question may not be “Can God be present when avatars receive virtual sacraments?” as much as “Do the Real Life people projecting themselves as a Second Life avatars *believe* God is there?”

Douglas Estes’ *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*

New Testament Professor Douglas Estes’ *SimChurch* is perhaps the most recent publication to explore the implications of Internet-mediated communications for religious institutions. Like O’Leary, Estes predicts evolutionary changes as people move from using the Internet simply for e-mail to embracing its immersive potential where “some people will spend as much time as they do in the real world.”⁵³ Planned for distribution in October 2009, select chapters were released by Zondervan and offered on Mark Brown’s blog.⁵⁴ In addition to exploring the notion of virtual church in general, he tackles currently “hot” questions in creatively titled chapters including “The Incarnational Avatar,” “Synthetic Sin,” “Viral Ministry,” and “The Social-Network Church.” “WikiWorship” particularly addresses sacramental concerns and offers

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 47.

⁵² O’Leary specifically references what John Searle calls the “sincerity condition.” “If we are to judge the illocutionary force of these verbal actions, the efficacy of the rituals for their participants, it appears that we must first understand the degree to which they actually exhibit sincere belief in the gods they invoke.” *Ibid*, 53-4.

⁵³ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009) 20.

⁵⁴ http://brownblog.info/wp-content/plugins/wp-ownloadMonitor/user_uploads/SimChurch_Sample_for_Brownblog.pdf

four main types of virtual sacramental practices as models for faith communities to consider: *symbolic, avatar mediated, extensional, and outsourced.*

Estes chose to explore each of the four models using the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist because of their universal significance within Christianity. Noting that there is a wide variety of expressions and theological interpretations within the Christian tradition, he describes how each model would function and reflected on what he sees as the benefits and limitations of each. In the *Symbolic Approach*, individuals participate in the sacrament by reading about it, meditating on its readings and ritual elements, and then doing some practice expressive to their understanding. The example he offers for the Lord's Supper is from a text-driven virtual church in which "the reader has the opportunity to either meditate on or administer Communion to themselves at their computer."⁵⁵ This is a low tech approach which gives wide access to the sacraments, however, there is no sense of community, no clear correlation to the traditional practice, and no qualified person to administer the sacrament for communities that make that requirement.

The *Avatar-Mediated Approach* includes practices that would occur in Second Life, where virtual representations of real people gather in a 3D virtual world to worship using a sacramental ritual. In the case of a virtual Eucharistic celebration, an avatar of an ordained person would bless virtual bread and virtual wine, other avatars would eat the consecrated virtual bread and drink from a consecrated virtual cup. Here, there is a gathered community, albeit via virtual representations, and shared elements. As Estes states, the concern remains that this type of practice is too dissimilar from its traditional form.⁵⁶ Both of these first two approaches are more individualized and lack tactile elements shared within a physically-gathered community, which is the source of great concern for many faith communities.

⁵⁵ Estes, 118.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 119.

In the *Extensional Approach*, Estes anticipates a virtual church community preplanning and pre-distributing sacramental elements. In the Eucharistic celebration, he describes:

A virtual church shares Communion together (telepresent in real time in synthetic space) using real elements that have been extended to members of the community in some manner by the pastor or priest. For example, I might log in to my regular internet campus, and when the pastor brings out the bread and the cup for the congregation during the live service, I use prepared bread and juice to observe Communion along with the rest of my virtual church (typing or speaking, “He did this for you,” to others in the forum). In this example, I say “prepared” since different traditions will have different expectations for the elements. “Prepared” could mean the elements were prepared by the individual, were gathered by a regional layperson or deacon, or were consecrated in advance by a priest and shipped from the mother church.⁵⁷

The reception of traditionally prepared elements shared by a virtual community gathered in real time (at the same time) is what Estes sees as the benefit of this approach. There is still no means for the gathered participants to physically touch.

Finally, the *Outsourced Approach* is described as occurring when members of a virtual church partake in sacraments through a real-world church. Estes describes an outsourced virtual communion this way:

This method of virtual Communion occurs when a virtual church establishes contact with real-world churches to set up special situations in which their virtual churchgoers can take the Lord’s Supper in a real-world church. This method might work best for virtual churches originating from traditions with so-called higher views of Communion.⁵⁸

This is a hybrid blending characteristics inherent to each the virtual and real worlds. The benefit is that the sacramental elements maintain their traditional form; however, the approach raises questions about the nature of community and the role of the gathered community and its leadership in the celebration and reception of the sacraments. Estes concludes by offering a challenge to Christian churches and their leaders; he calls on us to engage in a form of “Beta Worship” which would prayerfully consider ways to transform our traditional norms and practices for a new era.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 119.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 122.

SUMMARY

Called to proclaim the Gospel and make Christians in all nations, faith communities have embraced creative solutions to ensure that seekers and members can hear God's word, grow in faith, and experience God's presence. Christians define faith relationally, as more than an individual's personal practice, and affirm the familiar statement attributed to Jesus, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). It underscores the Christian belief that when two or more gather in mutual love, with genuine care and concern for the other, as modeled by Jesus, Jesus (God) is present in what happens among them. That gathering has been assumed to take place in a physical space. The dawn of the Digital Age and the creation of virtual worlds are reframing those historical assumptions. The implications are significant, not only generally in the Christian understanding of community and church and what occurs when members gather for prayer and worship, but also more specifically in what members understand in their sacraments and ritual practices.

Karl Rahner and Catherine LaCugna's writings provide some interpretive guidance. Based in the Christian Doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, Christians know the way that God comes to us is also the way we reach toward God - through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the model of Jesus the Christ as perfectly human and perfectly divine, we understand how we can reach the perfection God intends for all creation by similarly becoming wholly other-oriented. As we radically reorient our lives to follow the Way – Jesus' Way, we both experience God present and become God's presence for others in two forms, transcendent revelation and concrete revelation. Christians are conscious of God's transcendent revelation through the work of the Spirit. Intangible, unobjected, God permeates all creation. Christians also experience God as revealed in history through concrete, material form in words, objects, events, and people. Definitions and interpretations of these revelations are left to faith communities to discern. The record of ecclesial debates and identified heretics shows that the

process of recognizing, naming, and embracing what is of God has not always been easy. One of the contemporary challenges will involve defining what is “real” in cyberspace.

To contribute to the conversation, I have offered the notion of “virtual incarnations” as a way of naming online manifestations of the Divine. Using two exemplars, I have shown how God’s presence and call have been seen and heard by participants of MCC’s SL Sunshine Cathedral and the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life. Illustrating transcendent revelation, both of these churches are obviously feeding the spiritually hungry through prayer and worship, guidance and healing, service and outreach. The challenge currently being raised is whether or not and how concrete revelation, in the form of the sacraments, can occur in a virtual world. The Digital Age, like the Mass media Age, is causing humans to look at creation and God’s presence in it anew. With new information and experience, we have opportunities to glean new insights and reinterpret current understandings and practices in light of them. What distinguishes true leaders is an ability to prayerfully listen to the signs of the times and chart a course that stays oriented toward its mission. Early church leaders found a way to continue table fellowship as a way to remember Jesus and keep him present in their midst. Those who developed the Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity navigated language nuances and philosophical difference to find a way to name our experience “God” as fully human and fully divine and give humans access to the Divine in the already and not yet. New contexts have always led Christians to continued review and refinement (conservative though they may be) of doctrinal understandings and cultic practices. Can this be true as we move into a virtual territory?