

Can Virtual Church Be Missional?

Adam Eakins

We live in a world which today is dominated by technology. We now use mobile phones, emails, websites, GPS and many other technological advances as part of our normal daily routine. Many churches have embraced cyberspace and now if you don't have a church website then you are probably not worth finding anyway. Some churches do the internet really well and some are very poor, but that is probably another outside altogether.

Most churches use the virtual to advertise the physical or put another way, they go online to promote what is offline. However, could the church in the UK go one step further and could an authentic church exist online only? If so, would that church be missional in its character? In other words, in this time when we are being encouraged to create fresh expressions of church is a virtual church one of the answers in seeking to stem the tide of leakage of people from our churches? Could it go one step further and connect with those who are familiar with the world of YouTube, SecondLife and MySpace. Could Virtual Church be Missional Church to a Virtual Community, in our postmodern world?

This was the question that I set out to ask in my research project this year for my Sociology/Popular Culture Degree. As I plan to become a Baptist Minister in three years time will my first church be virtual and my parish global?

St. Pixels was launched last year as an experiment in online Christian community – whether that is church is a question that runs throughout the website along the lines of what are the minimum requirements to be church? Initially it began as a project of 'Ship of Fools' as a 3D experiment in online church which the core was to become the 'Church of Fools' (later St. Pixels) began and then following support from the Methodist Church was fully launched in May 2006 with a plan to move from a 2D format into 3D during this year. Their vision is to create a sacred space, a welcoming and witnessing community on the internet, to make disciples by providing opportunities for theological reflection, discussion and exploration and to proclaim Christ through the use of the internet and related technologies.

Now there is probably a debate that many of you would want to have about whether virtual church really is true, authentic community and an expression of the body of Christ. This in many ways is one of the main reasons St. Pixels was set up and there is a fascinating debate which goes on within this virtual community in regards to this whole issue. Why not join the debate here

http://www.stpixels.com/view_page.cgi?page=discuss-reflect-mission-croftarticle

However, another important question to consider is the whole issue of an age where technology drives so much of what we do and how we engage with one another, where does the church fit into this? In the 21st Century when you can shop, meet, do business, communicate, invest, work and play in cyberspace where does church fit in and will this fresh expression of church be naturally missional in its shape?

In a recent survey carried out on the community at St. Pixels there were some interesting findings in relation to who was using the Virtual Church, what thoughts they had and what they were gaining from being part of this online community.

The survey's evidence suggests that virtual church has not drawn in many who are not already regular attendees at physical church. 82% responded that they were at the least regular attendees at a physical church. This is backed up by the fact that over 70% disagreed with the statement that this was their main contact with religion. Only 7% stated that they had they own 'DIY' faith or no faith and 11% had never been to a physical church before. This would suggest that virtual church is not attracting large numbers of people who have had no previous contact with church or the Christian faith and so in its present state it does not appear to be challenging secularization or increasing engagement with church. It is clear that many see virtual church as something that is an add-on to their attendance at physical church. 52% strongly agree that virtual church compliments physical church with only 2% strongly disagreeing with this statement. One member of the community commented, "In regards to the question comparing virtual church and physical church experiences... I have no comment to choose one over the other. Both virtual church and my own church provide equally to my spiritual growth. They are both important aspects of my life and spiritual journey." It is worth noting that they refer to the physical church as their own church, showing a degree of ownership and maybe more commitment compared to virtual church.

Manuel Castells, who wrote 'Network Society', felt that religion would need to become 'real virtual' to retain any place in our society. However, there are mixed feelings about whether this virtual church is a good way to draw people back to physical church. 20% strongly disagree, 18% disagree, 37% agree and 25% strongly agree. This virtual church is not seeking to do this exclusively, their aim is to provide a sacred space on the internet where people from all walks of life are welcome to come and explore God and get to know each other in a general Christian context. Another respondent sums it up by saying, "I like virtual church as it is – it doesn't fulfil all my church needs, but it's an excellent complement to offline church." It would seem that virtual church is not drawing large numbers of people back to church but maybe it is enabling those who are part of a church currently to receive additional support and community which might mean they are more likely to stay connected with church whether physical, virtual or both.

There were other considerations that indicate that overall members of this virtual church felt it had a strong sense of community. 43% answered that it was easy to make friends in virtual church compared with physical church, with only 11% saying it was easy in a physical church. With nearly half the respondents feeling that friendships were easier to make online, this would again suggest that for them they were experiencing a true sense of community online rather than offline. It appeared to be linked to two other key areas which were tolerance and accessibility. 64% found virtual church more tolerant than physical church with no-one finding physical church more tolerant. Words used to describe this include, "Its open to anybody", "Diversity", "Meeting people from very different backgrounds" and "I'm not scared of putting forward my own faith and beliefs". As one user answered, "The ability to relax in myself and in my time, with my friends and speak from the heart and enjoy myself without having to put on a 'front' for those in offline churches." It is clear that many enjoy the acceptance that they feel in being part of this community.

So where does that leave Virtual Church? Well in an effort to create Fresh Expressions of church I think that it is still too early to judge whether this will have a large missional impact in our increasingly secularized culture but I think they are doing an excellent job in trying something new and seeking to honour above all God in all that they are doing.