

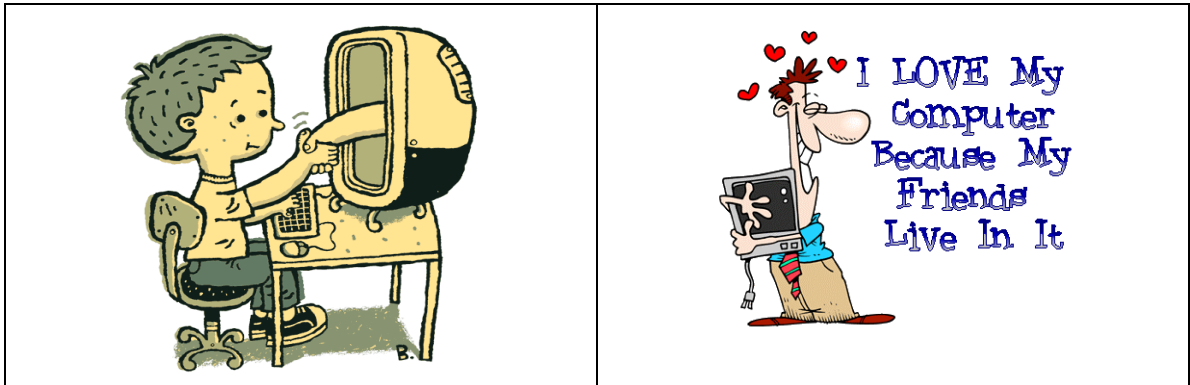
# Is Virtual Church

## Part of the historical Church? :

### An analysis of the Virtual Church

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# **Is Virtual Church part of the historical Church? :**

## **An analysis of the Virtual Church**

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# Introduction

As the Church enters the twenty-first century, and as technology marches inexorably onwards, a new kind of church has been birthed. This is a church that does not meet in a specific locale, but gathers in Virtual Reality. Is this church part of the historical church, and if so, what are its liabilities and virtues? How can this technology be used in order for the Church to foster Christians in the twenty-first century and beyond?

## 1. Virtual Reality

Since the advent of the Internet in 1957 and the subsequent arrival of the home Personal Computer and the World Wide Web (WWW), people have been using these tools for a myriad of reasons including research, education and communication.<sup>1</sup>

With this increase of communication, it was not long until Internet communities were formed. These communities could be broken down into three kinds: subjective (people gathering with similar interests); objective (a gathering of people affected by similar interests); and defining authority (people gathering whose identity was formed by allegiance to a common authority).<sup>2</sup> However, some critics dismiss the concept due to it being by definition word-based and full of self-interest<sup>3</sup>. Others argue that they can become “*closed subjective worlds*.”<sup>4</sup> Juxtaposed to these concepts is the knowledge that technology is advancing with greater methods of interaction becoming available, and global barriers collapsing which make communication and understanding between global citizens possible.

With these virtual communities came the world of ‘Virtual Reality’, to coexist with physical reality (all the properties of fundamental physics).

### 1.1 What is Virtual Reality?

Virtual Reality is “*a computer-simulated environment with which a person can interact almost as if it were part of the real world*.”<sup>5</sup> This Internet, or Virtual Reality, is a model of social interaction, whereby time, space and body are transcended in which to form relationships.<sup>6</sup> However, these relationships are not limited to the virtual world, but have some links to the world offline, in so far as they cannot be “*neatly separated from each other*” due to the import of offline interest to a Virtual Reality.<sup>7</sup> In doing this, people of similar interests, or enquiring after spiritual matters, are able to bring offline interests to the world of Virtual Reality. It is here that a virtual church can thrive, educate, inform and

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<sup>1</sup> David Pullinger, *Information Technology and Cyberspace*, London: Dartman, Longman & Todd, 2001, 20-21

<sup>2</sup> Pullinger, *Information Technology*, 75

<sup>3</sup> Pullinger, *Information Technology*, 73

<sup>4</sup> Andrew M. Lord, ‘Virtual Community and Mission’, *Evangelical Review of Theology* (2002) 26:3, 200

<sup>5</sup> Robert Allen (ed.), *The New Penguin English Dictionary*, London: Penguin Books, 2001,

<sup>6</sup> Heidi Campbell, ‘Internet as Social-Spiritual Space’ in Johnston E McKay (ed.), *Netting Citizens*, Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 2004, 221

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, ‘Internet as Social-Spiritual Space’, 224

satisfy.

## 1.2 Does God interact in a Virtual Reality Environment?

Clough questions the idea that Virtual Reality can be considered a sacred space due to its inability to “*communicate sacredness*” like that of a cathedral.<sup>8</sup> However it is the presence of Christ in people’s hearts that makes the church, and not a building with four walls. Jesus promised that where two or three of His followers meet in His name, He would be there (Matthew 18v20). The church therefore is not a building but the “*continuation of Christ’s anointing by the Spirit*.”<sup>9</sup> God operates within the hearts of people by His Spirit (Galatians 4v6) and not within the four walls of a ‘sacred’ building (Acts 17v24). It is in people’s hearts that His light shines the knowledge of His glory (2 Corinthians 4v6). But what is community? For Augustine, community is a harmonious collection of individuals.<sup>10</sup> This most certainly describes an online community, certainly where a group of Christians are meeting in order to discuss, worship and pray to their God and Saviour. Therefore, God can and does interact within a Virtual Reality environment, because He works in the hearts, minds and will of people, and is not restricted by brick walls.

## 1.3 What is a Virtual Church?

Some church leaders suggest that virtual church membership will continue to increase, and that by the year 2020 “*nearly all churches will be virtual churches*” in the sense that physical attendance will become secondary and most contact will be via Virtual Reality<sup>11</sup>. Another survey suggested that by 2010, 10% to 20% of US adults and teenagers will use the Internet as their primary spiritual input.<sup>12</sup> These figures suggest the growing importance of a virtual church in the life of people. But what is a virtual church? A virtual church is an Internet website, where people, who while possibly being geographically dispersed, gather together for fellowship, teaching, mission & worship, similarly to the way people have congregated since Pentecost.<sup>13</sup> This is distinct from a church that has a website containing information about itself, the Gospel and/or its own particular denominational dogma.

There are three main types of virtual church, all with some form of audio-visual capability and community interaction. Firstly those that are primarily text based, such as ‘Virtual Church 1’.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, churches with a two-dimensional graphical interface and text such as “Virtual Church 2”.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, churches with a fully three-dimensional graphical interface such as ‘Infinite Church’.<sup>16</sup> While these

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<sup>8</sup> David Clough, *Unweaving The Web*, Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2002, 13

<sup>9</sup> Miroslav Volf, ‘The Nature Of The Church’, *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol 26 Number 1 January 2002, 69

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, London: Oxford University Press, 1963, 15

<sup>11</sup> Andy Peck, ‘2020 Vision’, *Christianity*, September 2006, 14

<sup>12</sup> Lord, *Virtual Community and Mission*, 204

<sup>13</sup> Virtual church has many other titles including, but not exclusively, ‘Internet church’, ‘computer church’, ‘cyber church’, or ‘church on the web’.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Virtual Church 1’, nd, <http://www.‘Virtual Church 1’.org>, (accessed 07-05/2007)

<sup>15</sup> ‘Virtual Church 2’, nd, , (accessed 07-05/2007)

<sup>16</sup> Virtual Church 3, nd, , (accessed 07-05/2007)

three examples require registration in order to show commitment to the ethos and core values, guest passes are available. These guest passes allow countless others to watch the virtual church service and participate in discussion afterwards, as they did at the launch of 'Church of Fools' which ran as a trial for three months.<sup>17</sup>

## 1.4 Brief history of Virtual Church.

There are various claims by different churches to be the first website dedicated to being a virtual church. One of these was the 'First Church of Cyberspace' in 1995, based in the USA, and operated in conjunction with a traditional church, the Central Presbyterian Church of Montclair. Set up by Charles Henderson initially as an experiment, it receiving 10,000 visits a week, there was much discussion and prayer, but no active worship service was conducted initially. At one point, an online communion service was being proposed.<sup>18</sup>

May 2004 saw the launch of the 'worlds first virtual three-dimensional church', the 'Church of Fools', had 41,000 visitors within the first 24 hours<sup>19</sup>. During the three months trial, run in conjunction with the Methodist Church, weekly services were conducted which included, via representative computer avatars, hymn singing and synchronous interactive communication<sup>20</sup>. There was also the opportunity throughout to drop-in and discuss and interact 24/7 with others. It was set up as a direct experiment to see if online community could "do church".<sup>21</sup>

Denominationally in the UK, two mainstream denominations have created Virtual churches. The 'Church Denomination 1' created 'Virtual Church 1' and the 'Church Denomination 2' formed "Virtual Church 2". In early 2004, the 'Church Denomination 1' started 'Virtual Church 1' supplementary to traditional church. It is unique in that it has been assigned a Bishop, a parish, a PCC and a vicar. With regular times for worship and prayer, a robust system of pastoral care and interactivity, 'Virtual Church 1' has a global congregation. There are four main areas where members can assist the pastoral team: devotional life, pastoral care, outreach and technical/administrative support.<sup>22</sup>

In 2006, following on from their partnership with 'Ship of Fools' in the experimental 'Church of Fools', the Methodist Church of Great Britain created 'Virtual Church 2'. Currently this has a two-dimensional interface with text and

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<sup>17</sup> Matt Seymour, *Worlds first virtual church to be launched*, 13/4/04, International Society for Presence Research, [http://www.temple.edu/ispr/examples/ex04\\_04\\_16.html](http://www.temple.edu/ispr/examples/ex04_04_16.html), (accessed 07-09/2006)

<sup>18</sup> Eva Stimson, 'First Church of Cyberspace', *Presbyterians TodayOnline*, nd, <http://www.pcusa.org/today/archive/features/feat9811h.htm>, (accessed 07/09/2006)

<sup>19</sup> Church of Fools, '41,000 go to church in one day', 25/5/2004, , [http://www.churchoffools.com/news-stories/03\\_41000.html](http://www.churchoffools.com/news-stories/03_41000.html), (accessed 07/09/2006)

<sup>20</sup> Heidi Campbell, *Spiritualising the Internet. Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage*, *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, Volume 01.1, 23/09/2005, <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/5824>, (accessed 04/09/2006)

<sup>21</sup> Church of Fools, 'Satan loses his sulphur', 15/05/2004, [http://www.churchoffools.com/news-stories/02\\_sulphur.html](http://www.churchoffools.com/news-stories/02_sulphur.html), (accessed 07/09/2006)

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Paveley, 'Cyber spirituality: running an Internet Church', , 28/06/2004, >, (accessed 07/09/2006)

graphics, but plans are afoot to regenerate a three-dimensional interface. Church members are welcome to contribute in a variety of ways. There are regular times of daily prayer and worship, along with much interaction and discussion.

There are an ever-increasing number of virtual churches that are independent of denominational ties, such as 'Virtual Church 4'.<sup>23</sup> The number of these type of churches will continue to grow as technology evolves and development & operating costs decrease.

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<sup>23</sup> 'Virtual Church 4', <http://www.VirtualChurch4.org/>, (accessed 07-05/2007)

## 2. What is “church”?

In the New Testament the word “church” has two distinct, yet inseparable aspects. The first context is in the universal sense when talking about the entire body of Christ (Colossians 1v18). The universal church consists of all believers from the Day of Pentecost until Jesus returns. The second context is used within the confines of the local congregation, such as the Thessalonian church (1 Thessalonians 1v1). Within the New Testament, the word ‘church’ has this tension between universal (invisible) and local (visible) attached to it. Whereas the visible church comprises local communities of believers, the invisible church is the entire fellowship of elected saints. God only knows the invisible church inhabitants, but the visible church can be seen through local faith communities.

Some propose that the church is also many, charismatic and prophetic.<sup>24</sup> However, the phrase ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’ remains the best means of identifying whether a church is truly part of the historical church or not. The Church at its inception was “*a practice of shared faith*”, epitomized by these four dynamic marks,<sup>25</sup>. If a church does not bear these four hallmarks, then “*it is not a true church of Jesus Christ*” due to their unquestioned universal acceptance throughout time and in different strands of Christianity.<sup>26</sup> Although definitions may vary, these four hallmarks traverse the spectrum of Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

### 2.1 Marks of the Church

Jesus when praying in John 17v17-21, stipulates these four hallmarks of His church: one (v21); holy (v17 & 19); catholic (v21b); and apostolic (v18). These hallmarks are the Spirit’s functioning of Jesus’ continuing works for the kingdom to come, which are the true church’s “*inalienable signs*.”<sup>27</sup> The term ‘one holy, catholic and apostolic church’ is a “*verbal confession*”, denoting the four visible dimensions of the invisible church and being a community springing forth from its first century founding, and this is what was meant when the Nicene Creed was first agreed..<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, it evolves from generation to generation, but without losing the core beliefs held in the Nicene Creed.

#### 2.1.1 One

There can only be one church, because there is only one body through which salvation can be found within. It is unique and it is Christ’s. There is only one Christ, ergo there must only be one church. The unifying fellowship people have with each other is founded only upon the “assured and consistent fellowship of Christ.”<sup>29</sup> There was only one Cross, therefore there can only be one Kingdom

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<sup>24</sup> Howard A Snyder, ‘The Marks of Evangelical Ecclesiology’, John G Stackhouse (ed.), *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003, 85-87

<sup>25</sup> Daniel W Hardy, ‘Church’, in Adrian Hastings et al (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 119

<sup>26</sup> Howard A Snyder, ‘The Marks of Evangelical Ecclesiology’, *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, 82

<sup>27</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, London: SCM Press, 1977, 338

<sup>28</sup> William J Abraham, ‘I Believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’ in Christopher R Seitz (ed.), *Nicene Christianity*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001, 183

<sup>29</sup> Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 347

and church. There is only one God, therefore there could only be one people and one church known by its unity (Ephesians 4v4-6). He also prayed to the Father that his body the church would be involved in a united and dynamic relationship (John 17v11). Jesus stipulated that there is one shepherd and one flock, when referring to Himself and his followers the church (John 10v16).

Unity however does not infer uniformity. On the proviso that core beliefs are maintained (1 Corinthians 15v3-4), there appears to be room for some digression regarding secondary beliefs (Romans 14v1–15v13). Individual churches have different needs to be faced, and have therefore dissimilar requirements. For a group to claim that they have the ultimate truth and that they alone are the true church is systematic behaviour of cults and sects<sup>30</sup>.

Self evident of this approach are the differing worship styles of the New Testament church. Whilst most persevered with a Judaist worship model, others followed a different format (1 Corinthians 14v26-40)<sup>31</sup>. To further illustrate the problem faced by having one universal church yet a multitude of visible local churches, McGrath suggests that there are four distinct approaches which help explain this tension: imperialist, platonic, eschatological and biological.<sup>32</sup> The Imperialist view is favoured by the Roman Catholic Church, which claims that it is the only one church that can be observed as having unity, thereby signifying its claim to be the one true church. The Platonic viewpoint claims that there is a basic distinction between the historical church and the ideal church. The Eschatological viewpoint follows Calvin's theory of the invisible church becoming visible and known only when revealed at the last day and all present disunity will be abolished. The Biological approach takes the view that the historical church develops and evolves like tree branches. However Ignatius' maxim, "*ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*" dictates explicitly that the church's unity is found only in Christ<sup>33</sup>. The united church is a "*spiritual entity*", not to be judged by external signs and values but to be founded only upon God's unity within the Trinitarian Godhead.<sup>34</sup>

As for the sacraments, the Eucharist is celebrated together, hence its name in some traditions as Holy Communion. Baptism is done with others as a means of fellowship, with others performing the baptism and acting as witnesses.

The means by which this hallmark can be tested in any church is revealed in the function of fellowship. If fellowship exists and is functioning, then the church can be seen to be participating in this hallmark and be 'one'.

### **2.1.2 Holy**

This means that the church is holy is due to the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work within individual believers (1 Corinthians 6v11). The church is holy, in that it is God's separated people living in the community, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and through a perfecting faith in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 7v1). The church is not to be a holy closed society, but rather God's salvation bearing movement to

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<sup>30</sup> Steve Wookey, *When A Church Becomes A Cult*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 17

<sup>31</sup> David Watson, *I Believe In The Church*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978, 343-4

<sup>32</sup> Alister E McGrath, *Theology The Basics*, Oxford: Blackwells, 2004, 107-108

<sup>33</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Smyrneans*, 8.2

<sup>34</sup> Hans Kung, *The Church*, London: Search Press, 1968, 273

the world. The church is also holy, in that every Christian is holy and declared righteous through a living relationship with Jesus (Romans 3v22). This means that even though a human construct, the church has imputed holiness and is seen as the spotless and sinless bride. Despite being deemed holy, the New Testament church was also subject to doctrinal error (1 Timothy 6v3), immorality (Revelation 2v14) and division (1 Corinthians 11v18) .

Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and therefore a church's relationship with Him, is identified through biblical morality and faithfulness to His teaching. When in the book of Revelation, Jesus did not find holiness in the churches he was condemnatory of them (Revelation 2v20), but continued to call them His bride (Rev). Augustine cites Christ's holiness as the reason for the church being holy, and the church will be made perfect on the last day.<sup>35</sup>

However, being holy does not just mean being sinless. Holiness also means to be separated out and set apart for God's special purpose and work. This work is that the Gospel may be spread to all parts of the earth, by his chosen people, the Church - people who are and were being sanctified by the Holy Spirit and rooted in Gospel truth (2 Thessalonians 2v13-14).

For Luther, the church is holy because "*God's word cannot be without God's holy people and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's word.*"<sup>36</sup> By this, he means that wherever the Bible is preached, the church consisting of God's holy people also resides.

The method by which this hallmark can be tested in any church can be observed in the function of worship. If the community is a worshipping community, , then the church can be seen to be 'holy'.

### **2.1.3 Catholic**

The word catholic derives from the Greek word *katholios*, and its first written appearance is in Ignatius' Epistle to the Smyrnaeans.<sup>37</sup> Second century Christians used it to describe themselves signifying that God's salvific truth was to be communicated across the world, transcending all barriers of nationality, cultures and language<sup>38</sup>. Milne suggests that it was used to symbolize their "*distinction from the heretics.*"<sup>39</sup> In the mandate of Matthew 28v19, Jesus commands that the Gospel is spread throughout the world, and the church was to be His witnesses empowered by the Holy Spirit. Whilst the other first century religions were exclusivist by race, intellect or other means, Christianity was unique in that it was open for all, regardless of gender, race, culture or class. Paul had this in mind when he wrote "*Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman.*" (Galatians 3v28 CEV) The Gospel message proclaimed was for all people everywhere, including those with immoral pasts, just as Jesus commanded

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<sup>35</sup> McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwells, 2001, 468

<sup>36</sup> McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 477

<sup>37</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 8.2

<sup>38</sup> Timothy P Weber 'The Church And Its Ministry' in Daniel P Gushee & Walter C Jackson (eds.), "*Preparing for Christian Ministry*", Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998, 131

<sup>39</sup> Bruce Milne, *Know The Truth*, Leicester: IVP, 1982, 216

in the Great Commission (Matthew 28vv18-20).

While ‘catholic’ may be defined as universal, it can also be understood as “referring to the whole.”<sup>40</sup> This is because a ‘catholic church’ is a whole church, in that the Gospel impacts every aspect of a human and the ‘catholic’ church addresses the heart, mind and will of all people everywhere<sup>41</sup>. The church “possesses in itself every kind of virtue which can be named related to words, deeds or spiritual gifts of every kind...”<sup>42</sup>

It is also whole or universal in relationship to time and history; in so much as there has always been a people of God and will remain so after the end of time on earth.<sup>43</sup> It is participation within the church of the past, the present church and church of the future, which reflects catholicity.

It is through the function of mission, that this hallmark can be tested in any church can be discerned in the church. If the community engages in gospel outreach, then the church can be seen to be ‘catholic’.

### **2.1.4 Apostolic**

There are three main reasons regarding the church being apostolic: papal succession, apostolic teaching and apostolic mission.

Firstly, that the church was founded on the Apostle Peter, and that the church has an apostolic link to him via papal succession. This is based on the theory that the Apostle Peter was distinct from the other apostles in that Jesus always chose him first and that he spoke “freely and independently” for the other apostles.<sup>44</sup> It is also based on the tradition of *cathedra Petri* that states that Peter alone has episcopal authority, and that this is passed down through the Roman Catholic Church and its pope. This view is based on Peter’s confession of Jesus being the Christ, and Jesus stating that the keys to paradise are for Peter alone (Matthew 16:18-19). Redmond however expresses twenty-two objections to this theory.<sup>45</sup> His principle objection is based upon Scripture, which warrants that the church is founded on all the apostles and their teaching.<sup>46</sup>

Secondly the church is apostolic because the Church, according to Paul, is founded upon the teachings of the Apostles (Ephesians 2v20). The Apostles as witnesses to the very life and teachings of Jesus, and their teachings, were the identification mark that is considered normative practice for the early church.<sup>47</sup> The Apostles still play a role in church life today, in that the church’s teaching, authority, life and preaching is based upon the teachings found in the New Testament<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> McGrath, *Theology*, 109

<sup>41</sup> McGrath (ed.), *The Christian Theology Reader*, 465-6

<sup>42</sup> McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 465

<sup>43</sup> McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 471

<sup>44</sup> Bernard Lauret (ed.), *Fifty Years of Catholic Theology*, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1988, 50

<sup>45</sup> Robert L Reymond, *The Reformation’s Conflict With Rome*, Fearn: Mentor, 2001 38-44

<sup>46</sup> Reymond, *Reformation’s Conflict*, 53

<sup>47</sup> Timothy P Weber ‘The Church And Its Ministry’ in David P Gusher & Walter C Jackson, “*Preparing for Christian Ministry*”, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998, 131

<sup>48</sup> Milne, *Know the Truth*, 218

Thirdly, the two New Testament words translated as Apostle are *apostolos* and *apostolē*, both signify mission and being sent out.<sup>49</sup> Milne, while acknowledging the definition of Apostle, incorrectly does not accept mission as part of the apostolic mark and calls it a “missing mark”.<sup>50</sup> Mission is at the heart of the apostolic church in that it is sent into the world with a Gospel that is for all. Therefore the two assured reasons that the church is apostolic, is due to its being founded on the authority of Apostle-based teaching as found in the New Testament, and apostolic mission as in the Great commission (Matthew 28v18-20).

The means by which this hallmark can be tested in any church can be monitored in the function of teaching. If the church is a community engaging in bible teaching, then the church can be seen to be ‘apostolic’.

These four marks of the church can be summarized as “*one because Jesus is one... holy because Jesus is holy... catholic because Jesus is saviour of all... church is apostolic because, as the Father sent Jesus, Jesus sends us.*”<sup>51</sup> It is these four hallmarks and their functions that will be used as a basis to analyze the Virtual Church.

## 2.2 Functions of the Church

While these four hallmarks are statements of faith, they also must lead to declarations of function, because the Church must be actively visible. These four derived functions of the church are: fellowship, worship, mission and bible interaction. They are mutually interdependent and are the invisible church’s visible manifestations.<sup>52</sup>

### 2.2.1 Fellowship

One particular aspect of the church being ‘one’ is that its members have fellowship, resulting from walking with one another (1 John 1v7). The church is a gathering of humans, engaging in human activities with human “*customs, texts, orders, procedures and possessions*” through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>53</sup>

**What is fellowship?** This is rooted in the words *koinōnia* and *koinōneō*, which is defined as a mutual sharing together, and not merely a mutual association.<sup>54</sup> It was both in having fellowship and giving fellowship that the New Testament church understood the word.

**Why fellowship?** When Christians fellowship with each other, God is glorified

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<sup>49</sup> WE Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, 1981, 63

<sup>50</sup> Milne, *Know the Truth*, 220

<sup>51</sup> Appendix 6, 1

<sup>52</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 339

<sup>53</sup> John Webster, ‘The Visible Attests the Invisible’ in Mark Husbands & Daniel J Treier (eds.), *The Community of the Word*, Leicester: Apollos, 2005, 101

<sup>54</sup> PT O’Brien, ‘Fellowship, Communion, Sharing’ in Gerald F Hawthorne, Ralph P Martin & Daniel G Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, Leicester: IVP, 1993, 293-294

as a result (Romans 15v7). It is as a collective body that the Church fellowship grows in grace and maturity together, overcoming by grace, the weaknesses of each individual member (Ephesians 4vv12-16). Another reason for fellowship is for mutual exhortation “toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10v25). By this the lives of individual church members can live a consistent godly life, particularly if sins are confessed to each other (James 5v16).

New Testament exhortations to live holy lives are said to groups (Romans 6vv1-23). Victory is also seen in the eyes of a fellowship, rather than singular individuality (1 Corinthians 15v57; 1 John 5v4). Whilst God deals with us as individuals, it is through fellowship that God strengthens the individual, for individuals are “*complemented, supported, healed and compensated*” by other Christians.<sup>55</sup>

***How do we fellowship?*** Biblical fellowship sees the church having common purpose (Psalm 133v1-3), belief (Acts 2v42), hope (Hebrews 11v39-40) and needs (2 Corinthians 8vv1-15). Just as Christians have fellowship with the Father (1 John 1v3), Jesus (1 Corinthians 1v9) and the Holy Spirit (Philippians 2v1), so do they have with each other (1 John 1v7). The things a fellowship shares are, but not limited to, possessions (2 Corinthians 8v4), sufferings (Philippians 3v10) and the Gospel (Galatians 2v9; Philippians 1v5). By participating in His suffering and having fellowship with Jesus through his own sufferings, Paul was able to enter a deeper relationship with Jesus<sup>56</sup>.

### ***How does a Virtual Church engage in Fellowship?***

By sharing stories and interacting with each other, Christians in a Virtual church engage in acts of fellowship. Sharing a common purpose of seeking Jesus, worshipping and praying together, playing games, engaging in stimulating dialogues and lending support when required, are all facets of Virtual church fellowship. The Virtual Church can also engage in regular offline meetings, to help engage each other more.

## **2.2.2 Worship**

Worship as a church function derives from the hallmark of the church being holy. Worship is an intimate, dynamic and holy encounter with God, because Jesus is in the midst (Matthew 18v20) and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Philippians 3v3).

***What is worship?*** Worship is giving God alone (Psalm 19v2), glory due His name in the beauty of His holiness (1 Chronicles 16v29). The prime element of worshipping God in the context of a church is reverence. This is where through the willing use of the mind and the senses, honour and respect are directed towards God. This is to be done “in spirit and in truth” (John 4v24). Spirit denotes the personal status of worship involving the entire person – mind, body and will. Truth speaks of worship’s content, in that all true worship reflects God’s character. Worship therefore is multiform in practice, with richness in the

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<sup>55</sup> Milne, *Know The Truth*, 194

<sup>56</sup> PT O’Brien, ‘Fellowship, Communion, Sharing’, 294

breadth of its distinctive styles, to the one God deserving of our all.<sup>57</sup>

**Why worship?** There are various reasons as to why the church worships God, although primarily because God commands it (1 Chronicles 16v29; Matthew 4v10). The Decalogue also clearly commands people to worship God alone (Exodus 20v3-10). Not only is it a command, but God deserves worshipping by His church for He alone personifies goodness (Psalm 100v4-5), mercy (Exodus 4v31), holiness (Psalm 99v5,9) and power (Revelation 4v11). Thirdly, God is to be worshipped by His church in obedience to Him as creator (Revelation 4v11) but also as its Saviour and Lord (Habakkuk 3v18). Worship also brings exuberant satisfaction (Romans 12v2; Colossians 3v24).

**Expressions of worship:** Scripture speaks of various means by which the church worships God, including joyful singing (Psalm 100v2; Ephesians 5v19) and public declarations of praise (Hebrews 13v15). Perhaps the greatest manifestation of public Church worship is seen in the two ordinances (or sacraments) of the Eucharist and Baptism.

Celebrating the Eucharist is in direct obedience of His command to celebrate the remembrance of Him (Matthew 26v26-28; Luke 22v19). The Eucharist not only symbolizes His death for our sin (Luke 22v19), but also our acceptance of Christ's death for us () and our dependence on Him for spiritual life ().

Baptism, which is commanded for all believers (Mt. 28:19; Acts 2:38), naturally follows after conversion (Acts 2:37). To be baptized means to be baptized into Christ (Rom. 6:3), which symbolizes a total identification with Jesus as a result of being baptized into His body (1 Corinthians. 12v13) and into His death (Romans 6v1-6). Through baptism, our sinful natures are seen as dead with Christ (Romans 6v6), and we are raised to live a new life (Romans 6v4).

### ***How does a Virtual Church engage in worship?***

Worship in a Virtual Church has a variety of methods in which God's glorification is sought. Global worship includes singing, responsive prayers and liturgy. Each individual member having his or her own bread and wine can engage in the Eucharist, similar to traditional church. A problem may well arise with baptism, which is by necessity a physical action. This problem can be overcome by negotiating with a traditional Church to baptize the person wanting baptism.

### **2.2.3 Mission**

The Church's mission is evangelism. This is sourced from the church being marked as catholic. Evangelism is the virtue of bringing God's reconciling message of salvation to all people of all time in all places without barrier or hindrance. Throughout the Book of Acts, we see the commitment to mission in practice as God's reconciling message spread through His church to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and into the Gentile lands.

**What is evangelism?** Evangelism is purely telling others of God's message of

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<sup>57</sup> Paul A Basden, 'Introduction' to *Exploring The Worship Spectrum*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004, 19

reconciliation to all people of all time. It is not forcing people to adopt Church standards (1 Corinthians 5v12) and nor is it simply a message of join the church as a symbol of good works (Ephesians 2vv8-10). This catholic gospel says that everybody has sinned against God (Isaiah 53v6; Romans 3vv10-11); nobody can earn their reconciliation with God (Ephesians 2v9); that God sent His Son Jesus to be born, crucified and resurrected so that salvation can be had for all people of all time (John 3v16; 1 Timothy 1v15); and that it is by acquiescing to God by faith in Jesus alone that people are saved (John 5v24; Acts 16v31).

**Why evangelize?** The prime motivation for evangelism is out of gratitude for what God has done for the church, in that the church loves because He loved first (1 John 4vv10-12, 14,19). It was this sentiment Paul refers to when he writes, “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.” (2 Corinthians 5v14). The New Testament church told of God’s reconciling message out of an “overwhelming experience of God’s love” which they had received.<sup>58</sup>

While some are explicitly called to be evangelists (Ephesians 4v11), it also falls on all members of the church to do the work of an evangelist, following the example of Timothy (2 Timothy 4v5). Scripture dictates several reasons for members of His church to share their faith. Jesus commands us to tell others of God’s reconciling message. In the last words of Jesus’ earthly ministry, His church was commanded to be witnesses for Him (Acts 1v8). Evangelism is also an expression of love for God, through obeying His commands (John 14v15). It is also the church’s imperative mission because the church is the vessel God has chosen to spread the message of reconciliation (Romans 10vv14-15) to all people (Acts 4v12; 2 Peter 3v9).

### ***How does a Virtual Church engage in mission?***

Virtual Church evangelism is primarily based on a friendship evangelism model with building relationships at the core. It is talking to people online, interacting through blogs, writing of testimonies, engaging in discussion threads and not venturing into other online forums and communities. In a Virtual Church, where people are judged more on the ability to be persuasive rather than appearance, Scripture is powerful.<sup>59</sup> Evangelism is therefore not instantaneous (although it can be) but rather a process of journey. The Christian message is, according to Sweet, a “*diachronic narrative*.”<sup>60</sup>

## **2.2.4 Bible Interaction**

The apostolic church devoted itself to teaching from the Apostles (Acts 2v42). One of the tests given to manuscripts in order for it to be considered part of the New Testament canon was its link to the apostles.

**What is the Bible?** The Bible is the Word of God, and is the instrument of the Holy Spirit to bring people to faith (Ephesians 1v13) and ongoing sanctification

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Crowborough: Highland Books, 1970, 286-7

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Careaga, *eMinistry*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001, 153

<sup>60</sup> Leonard Sweet, *soulTsunami*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999, 424

(Ephesians 5v26). Paul writes that all of it is “God Breathed” (2 Timothy 3v16), in that it is inspired by God and has its origins in God. It is not just the ideas, but also the words that are inspired by God (1 Corinthians 2v13).

**Why interact with the Bible?** The Bible is capable of being understood by all God’s people. God the Holy Spirit enlightens Christians minds, so that they can understand spiritual truths (1 Corinthians 2vv10-16). Through interacting with the Bible, the church teaches, rebukes, corrects and trains people for the purpose of righteousness (2 Timothy 3v16). By interacting with the Bible, Christians keep from sinning (Psalm 119v11), are comforted (Psalm 119v52), have their minds focused on God (Psalm 43v3) and are sustained in a daily spiritual life (Deuteronomy 8v3). The church also interacts with Bible, as the Bible is a link to the apostles and prophets, who are the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2v20).

### **What is the interaction?**

There are five main ways in which members of the Church can interact with the Bible. Public reading of Scripture was regular in Israel and in the early church (Nehemiah 8v3). Presently due to high literacy, Scripture can easily be read in private as well as corporately. Memorization of the Bible was commended to “lay up His words in your heart” (Job 22v22). By reading and memorizing the Bible, meditating on it helps understand the implications of life’s occurrences and God’s blessings (Joshua 1v8). These three interactions lead to a fourth, obedience. By obeying the Bible, the Christian learns to obey God as it is His word (Deuteronomy 31v12)

Preaching/teaching of the Bible receives the main emphasis in the New Testament, such as at the Church’s birth and Peter’s address to the crowd (Acts 2). After they were dispersed due to persecution, the Apostles continued preaching and teaching (Acts 8v4). Luke gives thirteen different words for preaching, and over thirty are used in the entire New Testament.<sup>61</sup> Preaching is defined as “*God communicating Himself to man through*” other humans empowered by the Holy Spirit<sup>62</sup>. For Stott, preaching is the centerpiece of worship to God in the Spirit’s power.<sup>63</sup>

### **How does a Virtual Church engage in bible teaching?**

In a Virtual Church, bible teaching continues to be central. Sermons are preached and interactive discussions are engaged in afterwards. Topical teaching threads and blog threads can teach Scripture and commented upon. Audio files can be streamed or downloaded from the Church and played on iPods and other devices, for use in personal time. Particularly relevant is the narrative style when online “holographic stimulation” will facilitate emotional attachment.<sup>64</sup>

## **3. Research**

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<sup>61</sup> David Watson, *I Believe In Church*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978, 200

<sup>62</sup> Watson, *I Believe In Church*, 201

<sup>63</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982, 83

<sup>64</sup> Sweet, *soulTsunami*, 426

### **3.1 Case Study 1 – ‘Virtual Church 1’**

#### *‘Virtual Church 1’ logo<sup>65</sup>*

‘Virtual Church 1’ was setup and is run by the ‘Church Denomination 1’ and has a full time pastor. Statistically there are more men than women. Members are predominantly over the age of 30, and chiefly from the USA and UK<sup>66</sup>. Overwhelmingly it has a Christian membership from an Anglican or protestant background with a broad theological position. Half the respondents attend a traditional church regularly. Of those who no longer attended traditional church, half the respondent said that a traditional church was not needed to live a Christian life. Half also reflected that they were being spiritually malnourished at traditional church.

#### **3.1.1 ‘Virtual Church 1’ Fellowship**

Fellowship is achieved in the forum, which is only accessible to registered members.<sup>67</sup> Here is where discussion forums, private inter-member messaging, a live chat-room and chapel are accessible.<sup>68</sup> Prospective members acknowledge an agreement before registering to join<sup>69</sup>. It is in this way, a measure of accountability is ensured. Each member is prayed for monthly and new members are added to the circle on the 27<sup>th</sup> of the month.<sup>70</sup> There are forum hosts, welcome team and other roles available, exercising a servant role.<sup>71</sup> Within ‘Virtual Church 1’ there are pastoral groups with group leaders, assistant group leaders under the auspices of the web pastor and his assistants.<sup>72</sup> The abiding rule for fellowship is “Only be careful that this freedom of yours does not turn into an obstacle to trip those who are weak.” (1 Corinthians 8v9)

People are also given the chance to join a pastoral group where pastoral care can take place alongside bible studies. Initially there were two types of members: individual and community. This has now been altered to only community membership.

#### **3.1.2 ‘Virtual Church 1’ Worship**

Currently, ‘Virtual Church 1’ services are available only to registered members<sup>73</sup>. Every Sunday has a service at 10.00 GMT, based on the Celtic Daily Prayer. At 10.00 GMT and 19.45 GMT weekdays, prayer and worship services are conducted based on a rotational basis of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and the 2000 Common Worship. While being free to join any service at anytime, members are encouraged to attend in a regular pattern.

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Virtual Church 1’, nd, <http://www.Virtual Church 1.org>, (accessed on 01/05/2007)

<sup>66</sup> Appendix 4.1, 1

<sup>67</sup> Appendix 4.3, 1

<sup>68</sup> Appendix 4.2

<sup>69</sup> Appendix 4.4, 2

<sup>70</sup> Appendix 4.3, 2

<sup>71</sup> Appendix 4.3-4

<sup>72</sup> Appendix 4.5

<sup>73</sup> Appendix 4.9

On the forums is a prayer cycle, where prayers are requested under four categories: 'Immediate need', 'Long term need', 'Ongoing need' and 'World issues'. Non-members are able to post prayer requests in a special section clearly marked on the front page.<sup>74</sup>

### **3.1.3 'Virtual Church 1' Mission**

The work of evangelism and mission is done both through the members only forum by way of dialogue and discussion. Friendship evangelism is the predominant model of evangelism. There is a clear link on the front page that directs seekers to other sites to learn more about Jesus.<sup>75</sup>

### **3.1.4 'Virtual Church 1' Teaching**

Teaching is primarily through the dialogue and discussion forums as well as bible studies within pastoral groups. On the 'Virtual Church 1' front page, there are links to sermons and instructional videos. 'Virtual Church 1' according to one testimony "*is an international community that welcomes all who are seriously searching, trying to find spiritual sense in an increasingly non-sensible world.*"<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Appendix 4.7

<sup>75</sup> 'Virtual Church 1', Exploring Christianity, 04/05/2007, < <http://www.'Virtual Church 1'.org/cms/2005/11/25/exploring-christianity/>>, (accessed 04/05/2007)

<sup>76</sup> Appendix 4.7, 8

## **3.2 Case Study 2 – ‘Virtual Church 2’**

### *‘Virtual Church 2’ Logo<sup>77</sup>*

The membership of ‘Virtual Church 2’ is global (mainly from the USA & UK) with a majority of members over the age of 30.<sup>78</sup> The majority belief system is identifiably Protestant; most have been in some form of church leadership and are regular attendees of traditional church.<sup>79</sup> There were a number of reasons for joining this Virtual church including flexible attendance times, friendship, community life and the chance to engage in prayer and worship online<sup>80</sup>. Interaction has not been limited to just the community site but advantage taken of other means such as emailing, writing letters and meeting in person<sup>81</sup>. As regards to how respondents describe ‘Virtual Church 2’ 80% agree it is a church; 96% that is a part of Christ’s body; 87% agree that it complements traditional church; with a minority not having ‘Virtual Church 2’ as their main church contact; whilst a small majority think of ‘Virtual Church 2’ as an alternative church or an aid with which to draw people back to offline (traditional) church.<sup>82</sup>

When asked to compare ‘Virtual Church 2’ with a traditional church, ‘Virtual Church 2’ had a majority of respondents who thought that it was better for: diversity, tolerance and accessibility.<sup>83</sup> Traditional church had no majorities at all, and only rated more than ‘Virtual Church 2’ when it came to being involved, and for being able to be themselves.<sup>84</sup> Regarding the similarity of ‘Virtual Church 2’ and traditional church, the areas of new friendships, getting involved and being themselves all rated as being the preferred option.<sup>85</sup>

With regards to the framework of this paper and the important aspects of any church, fellowship rated 95%, worship 91%, mission & evangelism 80% & 66% respectively whilst teaching was 89%.<sup>86</sup> Highest rated was pastoral support at 96% and lowest rating was entertainment at 45%.<sup>87</sup> Regarding church functions, ‘Virtual Church 2’ and traditional church all four hallmarks were in similar positions for both church types.<sup>88</sup>

### **3.2.1 ‘Virtual Church 2’ - Fellowship**

Fellowship is conducted at various points across ‘Virtual Church 2’ and is seen as the number 1 function of a Virtual Church.<sup>89</sup> Fellowship can be seen in the

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<sup>77</sup> ‘Virtual Church 2’, nd, <http://www.VirtualChurch2.com/>, (accessed 07/09/2006)

<sup>78</sup> Appendix 1, 1

<sup>79</sup> Appendix 1, 4

<sup>80</sup> Appendix 1, 8-9

<sup>81</sup> Appendix 1, 14

<sup>82</sup> Appendix 1, 16

<sup>83</sup> Appendix 1, 18

<sup>84</sup> Appendix 1, 18

<sup>85</sup> Appendix 1, 18

<sup>86</sup> Appendix 1, 21

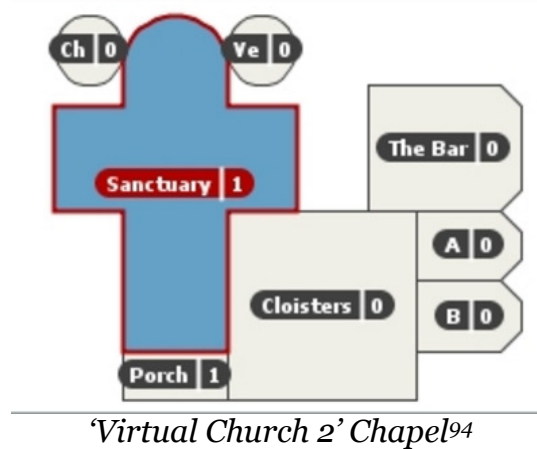
<sup>87</sup> Appendix 1, 21

<sup>88</sup> Appendix 1, 22

<sup>89</sup> Appendix 1, 22

chatrooms, the blogs, and interactive discussion boards where theology reflection is discussed<sup>90</sup>; and games played in the Bouncy Castle!<sup>91</sup> As regarding matters of fellowship, when asked about issues regarding honesty and openness, 93% agreed that people in ‘Virtual Church 2’ were honest and 68% were more open than in a traditional church. While 39% responded that it was hard to know whom to trust at ‘Virtual Church 2’, 18% couldn’t trust somebody they didn’t know face to face and 13% felt there was more deception in ‘Virtual Church 2’ than traditional church<sup>92</sup>. Fellowship has also involved meeting with others physically, either informally as some have done or at one of the regular meetings. As a sign of fellowship and of community, at the death of one of their members, a condolence blog was formed and a memorial service was planned.<sup>93</sup>

### 3.2.2 ‘Virtual Church 2’ - Worship



Worship is conducted in the ‘chapel’, which is a separately run programme called ‘Virtual Church 2’ Live on the computer. There are set times for worship and prayer, as well as scheduled events, of which some include audio.<sup>95</sup> Prayers are interactively typed in. If they are led prayers, the leader types in capital letters and responses are either typed back or verbalized individually. In the site survey, worship was rated as the number 2 function of a Virtual Church as opposed to it being number 1 function of a traditional church. Silent prayer has also commenced, and is twice daily.<sup>96</sup>

Worship content is broad and varied.<sup>97</sup> In this it matches the diverse belief systems identified in the survey.<sup>98</sup> The church is a non-sacramental community, in that they are still church even though the sacraments are not conducted.<sup>99</sup> In the future, as the church develops and grows, communion may be instituted as a regular occurrence but it is still being discussed.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Appendix 2.9

<sup>91</sup> Appendix 2.10

<sup>92</sup> Appendix 1, 20

<sup>93</sup> Appendix 2.3

<sup>94</sup> nb: the chapel is entered by bespoke software and not via the ‘Virtual Church 2’ homepage

<sup>95</sup> Appendix 2.1, 5-9

<sup>96</sup> Appendix 2.1, 3

<sup>97</sup> Appendix 2.1

<sup>98</sup> Appendix 1, 4

<sup>99</sup> Appendix 2.5

<sup>100</sup> Appendix 2.6

### **3.2.3 ‘Virtual Church 2’ - Mission**

Mission and evangelism are seen in the theological discussions where a broad range of theological views consistent with the core values are seen. ‘Virtual Church 2’ identifies itself as an incarnational model, and this is seen through the building of relationships.<sup>101</sup> It is also a “*missional community*”, that sees itself as complementary to traditional church, whilst reaching out to people who are outside of a relationship with God also seen as part of the commitment of the church.<sup>102</sup>

### **3.2.4 ‘Virtual Church 2’ - Teaching**

There were several functions of church identified in the survey that come under the banner of teaching. These were discussing theology, bible study, teaching, and discipleship<sup>103</sup>. Evidence of this function, can be seen in the following parts of the website: blogs, discussion, reflection and worship. Sermon series are regularly preached in the worship services, and series recorded and reported and available to all.<sup>104</sup> Bible reading is encouraged and there is a section dedicated to the sharing of Scripture for all to see.<sup>105</sup> Additionally as part of fellowship and mission, people record their spiritual journals online and some measure of advice given and received.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Appendix 2.5

<sup>102</sup> Appendix 2.5

<sup>103</sup> Appendix 1, 22

<sup>104</sup> Appendix 2.2

<sup>105</sup> Appendix 2.1, 12-17

<sup>106</sup> Appendix 2.1, 10-11

## 4. Implications and Applications

### 4.1 Liabilities

#### 4.1.1 Virtual World/Internet Addiction

Of the 50 respondents surveyed regarding the length of time they spent in virtual communities, 14% spent over 5 hours per day interacting with others in online forums and communities.<sup>107</sup> This may indicate a level of Internet addiction.<sup>108</sup> This could become a problem within a Virtual Church environment. One reason for Internet addiction is escapism from real life problems. When discovered the person would need to be encouraged to seek counseling or pastoral care given. A cure is possible but a need to recognize the problem is the first step. Other steps suggested include waiting for the plea to help, rationing, supervision and disposal.<sup>109</sup> The Virtual churches operators may need to monitor people's time spent online. The addicted individual may need to consider the spiritual discipline of fasting from Internet access, in order to regain power over their addiction.<sup>110</sup> If they are unable to do this, then traditional church may well be a better model for them to attend if possible.

#### 4.1.2 Virtual Community is not real community

Helland insists that all online interaction is purely about the transmission of information.<sup>111</sup> However, when information is being transferred (or communicate), this can have a psychological effect and does affect emotions as evidenced in question 1 of the survey.<sup>112</sup> So to say that it is solely about information transference is therefore wrong. Neil Postman categorically denies the legitimacy of Virtual communities due to a “*lack of obligation*” and therefore anonymity and accountability.<sup>113</sup> However as evidenced at ‘Virtual Church 1’, you are advised to read and agree to the terms and conditions before you register.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, you are entering into a covenant with fellow users and are accountable to them. Any misdemeanours in either of the Virtual church looked at, is dealt with swiftly<sup>115</sup>. Anonymity is not necessarily a bad thing, as evidenced by the percentage of people attending ‘Virtual Church 1’ who listed shyness as their reason for attending. Additionally, anonymity does not preclude dishonesty as seen in the ‘Virtual Church 2’ survey where 93% stated that members of ‘Virtual Church 2’ were honest about themselves and 68% stipulating that they could be open and honest.<sup>116</sup> Anonymity also did not prevent people seeking help, advice and sharing problems.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Appendix 1, 1

<sup>108</sup> Addictions.co.uk, nd, <http://www.addictions.co.uk/addiction.asp?id=Internet>, (accessed on 01/05/2007)

<sup>109</sup> Patrick Dixon, *CyberChurch*, Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1997, 110-111

<sup>110</sup> Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005, 112-113

<sup>111</sup> Appendix 5, 3-4

<sup>112</sup> Appendix 1, 1

<sup>113</sup> Neil Postman, quoted in David Pullinger, *Information Technology and Cyberspace*, 73

<sup>114</sup> Appendix 4.1/

<sup>115</sup> Appendix 2.8

<sup>116</sup> Appendix 1, 20

<sup>117</sup> Appendix 1, 21

Real community used to be seen as geographically centered. However, with the advent of Virtual community, this is no longer the case and etymologically, community has returned to its original concept based on “*social grouping and quality of relationship*”.<sup>118</sup> This is evident in the geographical spread seen in both the ‘Virtual Church 1’ survey<sup>119</sup> and the ‘Virtual Church 2’ survey.<sup>120</sup> There was also evidence of people in online communities giving and receiving help and assistance.<sup>121</sup> So Virtual community is far more than information transference, but consists of, amongst other things, mutual giving and receiving of care and assistance.

## **4.2 Virtues**

There are several virtues that have arrived with the Virtual Church. It is a spiritual avenue for people not attending a traditional church to live out their faith.<sup>122</sup> It is however with a different category of people that a major benefit can be seen in giving to the isolated and detached of society with a “*creative passion for the impossible*” that is a task for a Virtual church community.<sup>123</sup>

### **4.2.1 Assisting Housebound & disabled people**

One of the ways in which a virtual church is effective is in the area of helping housebound and disabled people. Housebound people, including those with physical, emotional and psychological problems, may only venture from their domicile on rare occasions. At ‘Virtual Church 1’ 22% of respondents found access to a traditional church was not catered for, and 24% were too shy to attend traditional church.<sup>124</sup> Additionally, one lady when surveyed responded that because she had a low self-esteem, she felt more at ease communicating in a Virtual environment.<sup>125</sup>

With technology evolving consistently, items such as the currently produced Dream-racer Cap (*Illustration 1*) could be configured to control computers<sup>126</sup>.

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<sup>118</sup> Pullinger, *Information Technology and Cyberspace*, 74

<sup>119</sup> Appendix 4.1

<sup>120</sup> Appendix 1, 1

<sup>121</sup> Appendix 3, 1

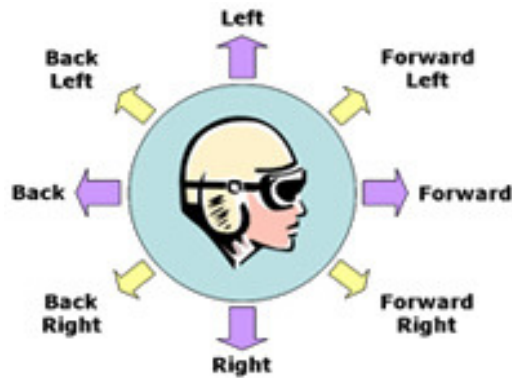
<sup>122</sup> Appendix 4.1, 5

<sup>123</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, London: SPCK, 1999, 159

<sup>124</sup> Appendix 4.1, 5

<sup>125</sup> Appendix 3, 52

<sup>126</sup> Geoff Adams-Spink, ‘Smart hat brings play to disabled’, BBC News 09/05/2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6625145.stm>>, (accessed 09/05/2007)



*Illustration 1.*<sup>127</sup>

The cap works by head movement, however as the designers acknowledge, this technology could also be used in a glove or shoe and therefore enable a semblance of ‘normal’ movement.<sup>128</sup> For more seriously disabled people with severely restricted movement, there is available eye-controlled communication device (Illustration 2).<sup>129</sup>



*Illustration 2*<sup>130</sup>

By using these technologies, housebound and disabled people would be able to participate in a corporate act of worship in a Virtual Church environment.

There is also the possibility of extending their participation to serving the Virtual Church in some capacity such as moderator, administrator or helping to lead worship and prayer times. This inevitably leads to confidence dealing with people offline and more in a God they desire to serve using their Spiritual gifts that may currently be lying dormant and unused. In doing this, people will develop confidence in themselves. Instead of feeling neglected, isolated and alone, they may feel wanted, and more importantly, loved by others.<sup>131</sup>

One major foreseeable problem with this proposal is that financially, it may be prohibitively expensive to arrange and operate schemes like these. There is also the requirement of sourcing technical support in the case of hardware and software malfunction. Training issues could also be an issue. However, with

<sup>127</sup> Dream Technology, How Dream-Racer works, nd, <[http://www.dream-racer.com/acatalog/How\\_Dream-Racer\\_Works.html](http://www.dream-racer.com/acatalog/How_Dream-Racer_Works.html)>, (accessed 09/05/2007)

<sup>128</sup> Dream Technology, <[http://www.dream-racer.com/acatalog/How\\_Dream-Racer\\_Works.html](http://www.dream-racer.com/acatalog/How_Dream-Racer_Works.html)>, (accessed 09/05/2007)

<sup>129</sup> Tobii MyTobii P10 Product Page, nd, <<http://www.tobii.com/default.asp?sid=553>>, (Accessed 01/05/2007)

<sup>130</sup> Tobii MyTobii Eye Control for Accessibility, nd, <<http://www.tobii.com//default.asp?sid=549>>

<sup>131</sup> Appendix 1, 1

God, if He is in the planning, nothing is impossible. Local church groups, (such as the Local Evangelical Alliance in the Forest), Christian organizations and denominations could pool financial and personnel resources, so they could be achieved. It would signify visually that churches have unity, even without uniformity. It would also give rise to the opportunity for traditional churches to work along with Virtual churches to the glory of God. Charities and Government help is also widely available to help subsidize costs or donate technology.<sup>132</sup> In helping the housebound, the Virtual Church will have extended the Gospel's reach and be seen "loving their neighbour" Matthew 22v39).

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<sup>132</sup> Computers for the Disabled website, nd, <http://www.cftd.co.uk/cftd.htm>, (accessed 01/05/2007)

## 4.2.2 Assisting the Geographically Isolated

A Virtual Church would enable isolated church communities, such as those ministered to by the Bush Church Aid Society of Australia (Illustration 3). This method would enable the Society to fulfill their vision.<sup>133</sup>



Similar links could be created with isolated Christian communities and churches in Great Britain. This would be similar to the way New Testament churches linked.<sup>135</sup> The New Testament communities linked for the following reasons: prayer support, encouragement, imitation and theological reflection<sup>136</sup>. Today, isolated churches can also gather together for fellowship, worship, evangelism and teaching in a Virtual church.

Another benefit is for Christians in persecuted countries to meet with Christians in the west. For example in China there is active persecution of Christians.<sup>137</sup> Chinese Christians can link into a Virtual church, such as the example of “A Non” in ‘Virtual Church 1’.<sup>138</sup> This of course may give additional problems, given China’s Internet censorship policy.<sup>139</sup> This shows the capability for Christians to communicate and worship together from a vast geographical area, where there may not be many churches, is self-evident given the scope and range of the Internet.

<sup>133</sup> Bush Church Aid Society of Australia, Vision Statement, nd, <http://www.bushchurcaid.com.au/About/bcavisio.htm>, (accessed 07/05/2007)

<sup>134</sup> Bush Church Aid Society of Australia, nd, <http://www.bushchurcaid.com.au/>, (accessed 07/05/2007)

<sup>135</sup> Michael B Thompson, ‘The Holy Internet’ in Richard Baukham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998, 50

<sup>136</sup> Thompson, ‘The Holy Internet’, 58-60

<sup>137</sup> Kate McGeown, ‘China’s Christians suffer for their faith’, *BBC News*, 09/11/2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/3993857.stm>, (accessed on 08/05/2007)

<sup>138</sup> Appendix 4.6

<sup>139</sup> Kathleen E. McLaughlin, ‘China’s model for a censored Internet’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 22/09/2005, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0922/p01s02-woap.html>, (accessed 08/05/2007)

## 5. Research Methodology

The primary means of research undertaken, involved two case studies of Virtual Churches. One of these operates under the auspices of the ‘Church Denomination 1’ (‘Virtual Church 1’);<sup>140</sup> and the other under the guidance of the Methodist Church of Great Britain (‘Virtual Church 2’)<sup>141</sup>. All research resulting from the Case Studies was conducted under the research ethics agreement required from ‘Virtual Church 2’, using a light level of disguise.<sup>142</sup> This was used for both Case Studies.

Secondary research involved three surveys/questionnaires, to which I did not submit a response. The first survey was conducted solely by ‘Virtual Church 1’ for their own ends over an unknown period of time with an unknown number of respondents in 2006 for their own research and analysis.<sup>143</sup> ‘Virtual Church 2’ conducted the second survey for their own research and analysis, to which I had some input regarding questions and access to the raw data.<sup>144</sup> There were 55 respondents, all of whom are members of ‘Virtual Church 2’, with one response allowed per respondent and no editing allowed once the survey was submitted. It was available between 22/01/2007 and the 02/02/2007. It was comprehensive of the membership base as an average of 50 people a day and 100 people a week were logging in during that period.

The third questionnaire was an online survey conducted by myself over a period of 1 week.<sup>145</sup> It received 50 respondents from various Internet communities and forums. It was setup so that there would be one response per respondent with the ability for the respondents to edit their own answers at a later date if necessary.

## Conclusion

Virtual Church is only just beginning in real terms and within the 2000 years of Church History. As technologies evolve and their use becomes ever increasingly widespread, the Church needs to adapt consistently in order that it remains ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’ body engaging in fellowship, worship, mission and bible teaching. By enabling those who are unable to get to traditional forms of church, whether for physical, psychological or geographical reasons, the Church will indeed be open to all. Enabling isolated churches, isolated Christian communities and individuals to meet in a Virtual Church will lead to Christ the head of the church being glorified. The Virtual Church will not supplant traditional church, but rather harmonize with it. The Virtual Church is one part of the “one, holy catholic and apostolic church.”

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<sup>140</sup> ‘Virtual Church 1’, nd, <http://www.VirtualChurch1.org/>, (accessed 01/05/2007)

<sup>141</sup> ‘Virtual Church 2’, nd, <<http://www.VirtualChurch2.com/>>, (accessed 07/09/2006)

<sup>142</sup> Appendix 2.4

<sup>143</sup> Appendix 4.1

<sup>144</sup> Appendix 1

<sup>145</sup> Appendix 3

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