

## Virtual Church Leadership

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Today, the necessity of the virtual church is debated particularly regarding how we can create a virtual church that offers activities similar to those in actual churches.<sup>1</sup> More than 70 percent of Korean young people are now taking part in social networking services (SNS).<sup>2</sup> Of these, a considerable number plays online games, especially “massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs).”<sup>3</sup> More young people are expected to participate in online games in the future because “Facebook” recently began to offer online games on its website. Given this development, if Christian leaders insist on ministering to young people only in the context of their coming into the premise of the church building, they might run the risk of being less welcoming to Gen N<sup>4</sup> members, especially the nonbelievers. There is therefore a way to linking the church with the cyber world.

The purpose of this paper is to argue that a “virtual church” can be a medium for delivering powerful messages. Virtual church is a product of postmodernism which seeks “individualized truth and narrative theology” by interactions between its members.<sup>5</sup> Here are four factors of interaction to consider in talking about virtual communities:

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1. Clint Schneklath, “Virtual Church,” *Word & World* 32, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 246.

2. Lee Jeong Hyun, “Young People Use the Internet 2 Hours Daily on Average,” *Chung Cheong Il Bo*, May 23, 2013.

3. Schneklath, “Virtual Church,” 249.

4. According to John P. Jewell, “Gen N is the abbreviation of “Net Generation” and includes everyone who was born after around 1977. These have no idea what a world without the internet is like. John P. Jewell, *Wired for Ministry: How the Internet, Visual Media, and Other New Technologies Can Serve Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 55.

5. Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 160-64.

(1) Interactions are between geographically dispersed individuals; (2) they use text-based communication; (3) communication is one-way with delayed response; and (4) members may assume identities not their own.<sup>6</sup>

Without understanding how interactions occur in virtual churches, Christian leaders cannot use the medium of a virtual community effectively. The virtual space changes on a daily basis and the Christian leaders need to stay current with the ever-changing world of the internet if to embrace young people from their environment. Of course, the virtual church is not strong enough to help young people all on its own. But once church leaders understand the weak and dangerous aspects of the virtual church, they can strengthen its weaknesses. As Paul used letters as a tool for evangelizing and supervising churches, so can today's Christian leaders treat the virtual space as a space to help young people who suffer from the negative influences of the internet. This study of the virtual church leadership is divided into three topics: (i) virtual community, (ii) virtual ministry, and (iii) virtual pastoring.

### Virtual Community

It is known that lonely, angry, and bored computer users often suffer from sexual addiction.<sup>7</sup> Isolation is deeply related to loneliness, and loneliness can cause some internet visitors to turn to pornography. For example, one author reported that when people play MMORPGs such as "World of Warcraft," they believe that their avatars unite with them.<sup>8</sup> According to the author, this might lead to committing rape or murder in real life. Christian virtual communities could help such computer users to overcome their problems and be restored to live as healthy social beings. But, for many people, their virtual and real-life communities are mixed together in their minds.<sup>9</sup> According to computationalism,<sup>10</sup>

6. Andrew M. Lord, "Virtual Communities and Mission," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 26, no. 3 (July 2002): 200.

7. Amy Frykholm, "Addictive behavior," *Christian Century* 124, no. 18 (September 2007): 20-22.

8. Wild Streak and Sweet Water (pseud.), "Online Ministry in a Massively Multi-Player World of Warcraft," *Tikkun* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 25.

9. Andrew M. Lord, "Virtual Communities and Mission," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 26, no. 3 (July 2002): 199.

10. The "Computational Theory of Mind," was proposed by Hilary Putnam in 1961. According to Steven Horst, "The mind is literally a digital computer and thought literally a kind of computation." Steven Horst, "The Computational Theory of Mind," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Spring 2011 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed August 14, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/computational-mind/>.

mental states can be conceived of as a computational state of the brain.<sup>11</sup> But John Searle, a University of California-Berkeley professor argues against computationalism, claims that a computer program is syntactic, whereas the human minds have semantics.<sup>12</sup> He, therefore, argues that implementing an online program is insufficient for a mind.<sup>13</sup> Virtual communities are limited in their ability to transform the mind.<sup>14</sup> Although virtual reality as an event or entity creates real effects, it is not factually real. The Bible tells us that our minds are renewed by the work of the Holy Spirit when we present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy, and acceptable to God.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, it is necessary for young people to have activities and fellowship in real churches in addition to a virtual church.

Even though the virtual community might make a contribution to help the church-leavers to go back to an online-church, it is not likely to be successful at forming non-virtual Christian communities. A 2004 Church of Fools (<http://www.churchoffools.com/>) poll of 2400 online-churchgoers found that 39 percent rarely attended church offline. Similar studies done by i-church (<http://www.i-church.org/>), St Pixels (<http://www.stpixels.com/>), and the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Epiphany/90/147/50>) found 35 percent, 22 percent and 17 percent, respectively, rarely attended real churches.<sup>16</sup> Holy Communion, baptism, and the laying on of hands cannot be performed in a proper manner in the virtual church. However, the unique characteristics of the online church must be understood: text-based interpersonal communication, rapid delivery of information, global networking, and accessibility for young people familiar with or addicted to MMORPGs or SNS. Therefore, the initiative to connect online activities with the

11. Kevin Vallier, "Against the Computationalist Theory of the Mind: In Defense of Searle's Second Attack on Computationalism," in *Computers, Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Reality: Proceedings of the ITEST Workshop, October 15-17, 2004*, ed. Robert Brungs (St. Louis, MO: ITEST Faith/Science Press, 2005), 28.

12. Steven Horst, "The Computational Theory of Mind," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed August 14, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/computational-mind/>.

13. Kevin Vallier, "Against the Computationalist Theory of the Mind," 53.

14. M. Timothy Prokes, "Real or Virtual: Theologically Does It Matter?" in *Computers, Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Reality: Proceedings of the ITEST Workshop, October 15-17, 2004*, ed. Robert Brungs (St. Louis, MO: ITEST Faith/Science Press, 2005), 96.

15. Romans 12:1-2.

16. Tim Hutchings, "Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church," *Information, Communication & Society* 14, no. 8 (2011): 1127.

non-virtual church should be supported because doing so will allow the distinctive advantages of the virtual church to be utilized.

In order to create a good virtual community, two important things are required: commonality and friends online. Commonality forges friendship, and friendship bears constant connectedness. Virtual connectedness and consequent friendships have helped people with traumas, such as experiences of sexual abuse, to overcome them through confiding their secrets to their online friends.<sup>17</sup> Confiding to online-friends brings them freedom, comfort, and healing. Yet, despite these benefits, there are some problems connected with the experience of internet sharing, such as hypocrisy, an unhealthy desire for popularity, and lack of accountability. Some people on the internet have the tendency to “brag” about only the positive aspects of their lives in order to obtain the “likes.” This makes others think of themselves as inferior to the ones who seem, on the internet, to have a happier life. An unhealthy desire for popularity can bring-forth lies and other kinds of trouble. Lack of accountability is related to the laissez-faire values and anonymity of the internet. Constant effort and attention to establishing a close and safe community on the internet are necessary.

### Virtual Ministry

There are two categories of the virtual ministry: ministry for evangelism to “win” new believers and ministry for spirituality to encourage the believers’ spiritual growth. The virtual ministry for evangelism consists of a virtual campus created using an online portal ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)), with a 3D church, avatars (virtual alter-egos), text-based forums, chat rooms, and a team of teachers who help visitors. Sometimes, it is necessary to appoint wardens who have the authority to expel the visitors who violate “netiquette” guidelines.

The virtual ministry for spirituality consists of a “rule of life” that directs the participants’ prayers and studies; liturgical images with holy emblems; short homilies; music for contemplative prayer; forums and chat rooms for registered members who use their real names; and small groups led by approved leaders.<sup>18</sup> This ministry offers a resting retreat to people living in the complex structure of contemporary society so that they may find themselves. The virtual church, with its well-established spirituality, can furnish its visitors with sources for self-enhancement.<sup>19</sup>

17. Renee Altson, “Virtual Community: The New Frontier,” *Youthworker* 21, no. 6 (July/August 2005): 40.

18. Tim Hutchings, “Online Christian Churches: Three Case Studies,” *Australian Religion Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (2010): 350.

19. Ellen T. Charry, “Virtual Salvation,” *Theology Today* 61, no. 3 (October

The virtual church as a faith community has to lead its participants to interact with the Triune God and other Christian communities. The contents of a virtual church should include a well-balanced introduction of God the Father, the Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Almost three quarters of religious surfers (72 percent) have used the internet to look for information about their own faith.<sup>20</sup> A virtual team should not fail to let them know about the Trinity so that the internet surfers may meet God or have more interest in God than otherwise. Also, explicit links between a virtual community and a community of the poor can be a good form of interaction.<sup>21</sup> Most young people do not know how much they are blessed, and they are stuck in their own problems. Communications with people who are poor may lead them to understand others' suffering and even to help others as well. Not only fellowship with members of a poor community but also with people from various other types of communities can help young people view their situation differently through the lenses of others' work and interests.

The virtual church can be used as a spiritual network, worship space, mission tool, and defender of religious identity.<sup>22</sup> These functions can work effectively when programs take the form of narratives. The Menlo Park Presbyterian Church ([www.mppc.org](http://www.mppc.org)) archives narrative style sermons on the internet. For example, sermons entitled "Audacious Prayer" are delivered by nine speakers who tell their own stories.<sup>23</sup> A visitor is able to choose a sermon according to his liking and listen. Someone may criticize this method as a "commodification" of knowledge—that is, knowledge understood as a commodity that can be handled and operated according to personal preference.<sup>24</sup> But it is important to understand that the internet does have a tendency to support consumerism. A spiritual leader has to exercise leadership to transform the virtual church

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2004): 340.

20. Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Something are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 210.

21. Andrew M. Lord, "Virtual Communities and Mission," 203.

22. Heidi Campbell, "Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narrative of Religious Internet Usage," *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1, no. 1 (2005): 14, under "Special Issue on Theory and Methodology," accessed August 6, 2013, <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltext-server/5824/1/Campbell4a.pdf>.

23. Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, accessed August 6, 2013, <http://www.mppc.org/series/9-speakers-4-campus-10-services/audacious-prayer>.

24. Elizabeth Patterson, "The Questions of Distance Education," *Theological Education* 33, no. 1 (1996): 61-62.

into a holy space where discourses and narratives can be exchanged in Christ Jesus.

### Virtual Pastoring

Pastoring in the virtual church has to be done in ways equalitarian and cooperative. In the context of the virtual church, everyone is a leader and everyone is a follower. The internet world is an equal society with low power distance. It also promotes intercultural, intergenerational, and interactive communication. The virtual church cannot be pastor-centered, nor can it follow a managerial model (e.g., with a CEO as decision-maker); rather, it is more like team ministry that practices the priesthood of all believers.<sup>25</sup> A Christian leader has a communal and shared authority with the capability of encouraging connectedness and kingdom values. He or she, as a member of a particular online community protests consumerism, violence, sexual perversion, and nihilistic abandonment that have left generations without hope.<sup>26</sup>

According to David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, 38 % of unbelieving young people have bad image about Christianity, whereas 16 % have good impression.<sup>27</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons focus on the reasons of bad image and explain how to overcome or cope with them. But a leader in the virtual church needs to maximize favorable impression about Christianity, because it is believed that evil can be overcome by what is good (Rom 12:21). The six predominant components of a good image about Christianity revealed by a survey should be noted. They are: "it teaches the same basic idea as other religions (28%), it has good values and principles (26%), it offers hope for the future (19%), it is friendly (18%), it gives a faith you respect (16%), and it consistently shows love for other people (16%)."<sup>28</sup>

The fact that teaching about Christianity has the highest responses (28% and 26%) among the categories reviewed shows the kind of spiritual thirst people have. In order for this thirst to be filled, a virtual teacher has to use what is called a "fully guided instruction," which is known as the best teaching method for the "novice learners."<sup>29</sup> A "fully guided instruction" (or "explicit instruction") is as follows:

25. David A. Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 106.

26. Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence*, 107.

27. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 25.

28. Kinnamin and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 28.

29. Robert A. Reiser and John V. Dempsey, eds., *Trends and Issues in In-*

(a) The teacher demonstrated a step-by-step plan (strategy) for solving the problem; (b) the plan was problem specific and not a generic, heuristic guide for solving problems; and (c) students were actively encouraged to use the same procedure/steps demonstrated by the teacher.<sup>30</sup>

With this instruction method, a virtual teacher can teach the Bible, how to pray, the meaning of worship and right attitude for it, and basic knowledge about real church activities. Teaching can be done in various ways such as one-to-one, or one-to-two or more (up to ten persons, because more than ten persons are not easy to handle), or as a Bible forum (the novice is not recommended to join this form). The goal of a virtual teacher is to establish a close rapport with the novice learners. Of course, a team of teachers should consist of those who understand the importance of having a close and sound relationship with the novice and have the ability to manage it.

As far as the online pastoring is concerned, trust and empathy are critical. Being able to trust depends on the impression created by the first messages of the virtual-team members. An important maxim among the online community is, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression."<sup>31</sup> Online interpersonal trust is correlated with the number of "likes." The more "likes" recorded, the greater the trust. The most important is how attractive the discussion topics and online communities are to the new visitor. Leaders need to have empathic accuracy, which is the ability to infer people's thoughts and feelings, and they must also be able to determine appropriate, supportive, and encouraging responses.<sup>32</sup> If a virtual team is comprised of various experts, the shared values between the visitors and the team members can build a high empathic accuracy. Without supportive responses from the virtual team members, however, empathic accuracy alone fails to establish trust.

According to Robert E. Coleman, Jesus' strategy to win His disciples consisted of seven steps: "1) look for servant workers; 2) stay with them as much as possible; 3) show them how to live the gospel; 4) involve them in ministry; 5) keep them growing and going; 6) expect them to

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*structional Design and Technology*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2012), 377.

30. R. Gersten, D. J. Chard, M. Jayanthi, S. K. Baker, P. Morphy and J. Flojo, "Mathematics Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities: A Meta-analysis of Instructional Components," *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 3 (September 2009): 1228.

31. Diane L. Coutu, "Trust in Virtual Teams," *Harvard Business Review* 76, no. 3 (May-June 1998): 20.

32. Jinjuan Feng, Jonathan Lazar, and Jenny Preece, "Empathy and Online Interpersonal Trust: A Fragile Relationship," *Behaviour and Information Technology* 23, no. 2 (March-April 2004): 99.

reproduce; and 7) trust them to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>33</sup> In a virtual church, the first and second steps can be successfully accomplished by an excellent virtual teacher or pastor. Accomplishing steps three to seven, however, are difficult because they require personal involvement outside of the virtual community. Nonetheless, it does not mean that the virtual church is in vain. Using the vantage points of the virtual church, assistance can be given to the young people who are ready to move beyond the level three of spiritual growth by integrating the advantages of the virtual church and the real church.

A leader in the virtual church must beware of four dangers in the virtual space. The first is the connection of spirituality and sexuality. Today’s media-based culture has an aspect of consumerism that utilizes sensuality as a means of business. Pornographic industry can try to use this technology and earn money through pathologic items.<sup>34</sup> Unless a leader always keeps this in mind, a virtual church’s holy ground will be changed into a place of decadence. The second danger is that cyberspace is a place of pluralism in which religions compete with each other. Both “orthodox religions” and “cults” exist together in cyberspace. So, this threatens the perception of the reliability of religious institutions. Furthermore, there is a possibility of “neo-pluralism,” which means that the advent of “technocratic and political elites” can cause religions of cyberspace to be manipulated under their power.<sup>35</sup>

The third concern is that the Christian concept of eternal life can be treated as a transient notion and therefore can be manipulated like any other cyberephemera.<sup>36</sup> A plethora of religious spaces in the internet can cause people to be suspicious of the unchangeable truth the Christian faith upholds. The characteristics of the virtual space are “pluralism, diversity, and tolerance, creating an environment in which different spiritualities aren’t seen as mutually exclusive.”<sup>37</sup> The fourth danger is related to soteriology in the online world. Soteriology on the internet is in line with that of Gnosticism, for virtual salvation is based on ghosts (avatars) without human bodies.<sup>38</sup> So, a leader in the virtual church

33. Robert E. Coleman, “The Jesus Way to Win the World,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29, no. 1 (January 2005): 78-80.

34. Howard A. Snyder, “The Cybergeneration,” *Christianity Today* 37, no. 15 (December 1993): 16.

35. Eliezer Ben-Rafael, “Kibbutz: Survival at Risk,” *Israel Studies* 16, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 87.

36. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 58.

37. Walt Mueller, *The Space Between: A Parent’s Guide to Teenage Development* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 84.

38. J. Matthew Ashley, “The Word Made Virtual: The Soteriology of the



should help the online participants to embody their faith and their salvation by means of spiritual exercises such as the *lectio divina* and promote having a sound fellowship with the members of a real church.<sup>39</sup>

### Conclusion

The age of the printed word fostered reasoning, whereas the internet age promotes intuition, images, and impressions.<sup>40</sup> Reading a book leads a person to having an in-depth reflection, but the internet provides only a superficial level of knowledge. The former provides occasions to develop integrated and holistic thinking; the latter, for the most part, offers only interconnecting ideas. Therefore, people living in the internet age can lack proper skills to develop integrated thinking, which is needed in meditating on the Bible. The interactive digital culture made possible by the internet allows people to establish communities based on this new form of communication technology. Christian leaders need to utilize this new form of communication and “community” for God’s glory. The virtual church can encourage young people to form online communities in Christ. In a virtual ministry, spiritual formation based on holy imagination is crucial. In addition, it can lead people to have a restored faith in God. The role of a virtual leader is to help young people to first “question their faith,”<sup>41</sup> so that they can be led to solve their skepticism and ultimately become strengthened in faith.

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Internet,” *An American Catholic Journal of Ministry* 14, no. 1 (February 2001): 78.

39. Ashley, “The Word Made Virtual,” 80.

40. Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 132.

41. Mueller, *The Space Between*, 84.