

The Networked Congregation: Embracing the Spirit of Experimentation

by Andrea Useem

About this Guide and the Author

Digital technologies mean we live in a time of rapid change. Every day we have new digitized ways to learn, interact, and do business. What do these changes mean for religious congregations?

This booklet is meant to be a guidebook: a short introduction to the digital world of Web 2.0 technologies and a friendly, informed voice to help you navigate its challenges, promises, and pitfalls. As you will see, there is no quick answer: Social technologies are neither all bad nor all good, and deciding which fit your own congregation will necessarily be a process of trial and error.

To help bring this process to life, you will meet real-life individuals and congregations who are already navigating this new world. You will encounter a Northern Virginia church organized solely online—and see how its weekly gatherings are intimate, spirit-filled events, without the brick-and-mortar organization of a traditional church. You will also meet a campus ministry organizer who uses Facebook to connect with college students, even when using this social utility means making careful choices about privacy and personal boundaries. A blogging pastor, a church with a video ministry, a busy mom with a web consulting business for Jewish congregations—all these stories are meant to help you reflect on and evaluate your own situation.

The goal here is to move behind both the hype over Web 2.0 tools and the sense of dread they evoke in some. Wisdom lies somewhere between the two. And as your congregation—whether "born digital" or only slowly awakening to this new world—rides the current of digital change, you are sure to be surprised by what you discover.

About the Author

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Dedication

Dedicated to the late Anne Van Dusen, whose enthusiasm and hope for congregations in the digital age brought this project to life.

Also available online at:

<http://www.congregationalresources.org/Networked/About.asp>

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Introduction

Editor's Overview: In the Introduction, Andrea Useem explains the aim of this booklet, which is "to take a reasoned, thoughtful look at congregational life in the digital age and ask how congregations can best navigate this new terrain." She further explains that the booklet seeks to provide both practical advice and philosophical support for congregations learning to make the most of the networked world.

You'll learn about the Alban Institute's one-day gathering that launched this booklet—a gathering that included communications scholar Heidi Campbell, public television editors and designers, campus ministry coordinators, and pastors from around the country. All of these participants raised hopes, concerns, and questions similar to those you may have.

The Introduction also offers a broad map to the rest of the booklet, particularly the sections "Religion from Web 0.0 to 2.0 and Beyond," "The World of Web 2.0—Challenge and Promise," and "Technology in Action."

Experimenting in a New World

Dusk is nearing on a Saturday night in northern Virginia, and a townhouse in a quiet neighborhood has a steady stream of visitors. People in ones and twos approach the house, carrying dishes wrapped in tinfoil, and knock on the door. Friendly faces answer, inviting newcomers inside the small but elegantly furnished home, making introductions and pointing toward the appetizers, chicken dinner, and drinks, while members greet each other with hugs and laughter. For the Gathering of the Beloved in Northern Virginia, a Christian group organized solely through the social networking site Meetup.com, this is church.

A year old, the group regularly meets in one another's houses and sometimes for picnics or breakfast at the International House of Pancakes, with average attendance around twenty or thirty people. Group members give new meaning to the word *diversity*. They include newlyweds and grandmothers, single people and parents, native born and foreign born, military families and Democratic party volunteers, Spanish speakers and French speakers, and even two people originally born into Judaism. The group has no leader; eight regulars share the informal title "assistant organizer."

The church has no building; its "front door" is on MeetUp.com, a free, locally based social networking website whose motto is "Use the Internet to get off the Internet!" By punching in your zip code and typing in a few key words (knitting, IT professionals, pick-up soccer), you can join a group in your area that meets regularly in person.

The group page for the Gathering of the Beloved on MeetUp also serves as an event calendar, message board, and de facto church directory, where members post photos and keep up with one another. But group members say they aren't particularly "techie" and say they use MeetUp simply because it's a convenient tool. "We don't come together to worship technology, we come together to worship Jesus Christ. A tool like MeetUp just makes it that much easier for us to find each other," said Will Goodman, one of the group's assistant organizers.

The Gathering of the Beloved in Northern Virginia is a vivid example of the power of a new generation of online tools that are available to connect strangers in intimate ways. It may seem like an impossible paradox, but the worship-filled living room of this Virginia townhouse demonstrates how seemingly impersonal technological tools can be used to create vibrant religious communities.

The World of Web 2.0

That the Internet has ushered in a digital revolution, reshaping everything from the business landscape to social relationships to personal habits, is no longer news. E-mail addresses are now as ubiquitous and unremarkable as phone numbers, and search engines are increasingly the receptacle for our most practical—and most existential—questions. But even if you go online to share photos, do your holiday shopping, and read the day's news, you may not have grasped the full impact of this digital revolution or understood how the forces unleashed by it continue to break boundaries and overturn our most basic assumptions.

Our world today is profoundly new. And in these transformations, nothing is sacred. Just as newspapers find their business models spiraling downward and corporations scramble to find an authentic online presence, so too religious congregations are seriously affected by the expansion of digital life. Yes, congregations have a unique purpose and mission, existing for divine purposes that can't be quantified or confined, but in the human realm, in the material world where the congregation plants its feet on the ground, change is sprouting up through the floorboards. What does it mean to be a geographically rooted, brick-and-mortar congregation in a world of virtual cathedrals, online prayer groups, and MeetUp churches where intimate spiritual connection is possible at any time of day or night?

To make sense of these changes and look specifically at what the newest iterations of the Internet—collectively known as "Web 2.0"—mean for congregations, the Congregational Resource Guide (a joint project of the Alban Institute and the Indianapolis Center for Congregations) convened a one-day gathering in late April 2008, bringing together more than twenty congregational leaders, faith bloggers, and Web 2.0 experts. The conversation was frank and focused: What do all these changes mean for congregational life? At times the discussions ranged from the practical (How can Twitter be used to organize church events?) to the philosophical (Do online tools isolate us?). Not every question had a ready answer, but the conversation as a whole mapped the terrain, pointing to both the incredible possibilities and unknown effects of these new technologies.

This guide is a distillation and exploration of that daylong conversation, augmented by further interviews, research, and reflection. The aim of this booklet is to take a reasoned, thoughtful look at congregational life in the digital age and ask how congregations can best navigate this new terrain. Change always brings dislocations with perceived winners and losers, and the digital revolution is no exception. By examining how larger social forces relate to technological trends, sifting through the latest research, and learning from everyday faith leaders at work in the field, we hope to provide some practical guidance and philosophical support for congregations as they figure out how to live in—and make the most of—this new world.

Part One ("Religion from Web 0.0 to 2.0 and Beyond") explores how digital religion existed at the dawn of the Internet age, and how it has evolved since. Part Two ("The World of Web 2.0—Challenge and Promise") tells stories of real-life communities engaging online, as a way of exploring the pros and cons of the new landscape. And Part Three ("Technology in Action") offers some practical advice for congregations as they navigate the digital road ahead.

The Good News and the Bad News

Whether by coincidence or not, one of the powerful forces that has driven the rapid evolution of Internet technologies over last three decades is the same one that drives congregational life: the longing for community. When the earliest e-mail systems were constructed in the late 1960s and early 1970s to link research scientists, discussion groups popped up spontaneously as people thousands of miles apart discovered and explored shared interests. The first religion-related discussion group began in 1984, demonstrating early on that the Internet would be home to the full gamut of human experience.

A new generation of Internet tools known as Web 2.0 have accelerated and enriched the online interaction first seen on e-mail listservs, on discussion boards, and in chat rooms. Like sound coming to motion pictures, like two dimensions becoming three, these new tools allow us to more fully express ourselves online. Rather than being identified only by an e-mail address or user name when posting on an e-mail list or discussion board, we can now share family photos, champion social causes, or express opinions via social networking sites. Rather than simply consuming news and information online, we can post our comments at the end of news articles or even publish our own online column or blog. Now we can not only buy an obscure out-of-print book, but also find the five other people in the world who share an enthusiasm for that book.

These new tools are at once hypermodern—we can talk to one another via video online in a way only imagined in science fiction movies—and primitive. Meeting online and forming small groups allows for what scholar Heidi Campbell calls a retribalization of society as we seek out others who share our identities and interests. For many who use these tools, the distinction between online life and offline life often becomes meaningless, as the stories of our lives unfold simultaneously in both spheres. No longer limited by geography, communities thrive online.

This development—the existence of new faith communities transcending both time and space—is perhaps most challenging to congregations, which have historically depended on geography, buildings, and scheduled, face-to-face events for definition. If believers can now find each other online, even pray together in something resembling three-dimensional reality in virtual worlds like Second Life, is the local parish or church or synagogue or mosque still relevant? Are traditional congregations a middle man that can now be done away with, just as online music stores like iTunes have helped drive record stores out of business? Even if the answers to such questions are a nuanced yes and no, the trends are still troubling to those who have spent their lives devoted to a particular congregation.

The good news is that congregational life and online life are not competing in a zero-sum game. If people go online to connect with other believers or to deepen their faith, this activity does not mean a net loss for the congregation that person might have turned to had the Internet not been available, according to Heidi Campbell, a professor of communications at Texas A&M University and an expert on religion and digital technology. In fact, she said, the very opposite is true. Research by Campbell and others has demonstrated that online religious activity may lead people to become more invested with their local faith communities.

The news that religion online, in general, enriches rather than diminishes congregational life should come as a welcome relief to many who are ambivalent or fearful about the consequences of the digital revolution. This finding can help lead the conversation in positive directions; religious leaders can explore these tools with greater confidence, searching for online utilities that will deepen and expand congregational life.

But before this finding lures us into a feeling of grateful safety, Campbell warned that while some well-worn objections to Internet life may be put to rest, other challenges have yet to be fully considered. She pointed to a finding from other scholars that online faith communities have the potential to promote networked individualism, in which the individual, rather than the family or community, becomes the primary agent for forming and monitoring relations online or navigating towards online forums where he or she feels most comfortable and fulfilled.

This focus on individual choice and personal benefit, Campbell suggested, may weaken the ties that run between the individual and the community: The community has less authority over, and responsibility for, the individual, who in turn has fewer obligations to others. "If religion is in essence about relationship with the divine and other believers, then situating it in an environment that exalts the individual and free choice could be problematic," wrote Campbell in her 2005 book, *Exploring Religious Communities Online*. In response to these and other challenges, she called on congregational leaders to become "critical friends" of new technologies, embracing them with both openness and skepticism.

Burning Questions

Within the big picture, each congregation must make its own way with its individual complexion of assets and limitations. According to research from the California-based Barna Group, small churches are least likely to use new technologies such as social networking or video presentations or e-mail communication. Race, income, denomination, and regional location also play a role in separating technology-friendly and technology-resistant congregations. With congregations facing their own particular circumstances, different leaders have different questions they need answered.

Greg Atkinson, who writes, teaches, and blogs about "Church 2.0" issues primarily in the evangelical context, said he has found congregational leaders are scared of two things about Web 2.0 technologies. "First, they are afraid of the potential for evil. Every pastor's worst nightmare is a person coming online and posting obscene things or links to pornography. Second, they are worried about the tail wagging the dog, that the technology would get in the way of their main thing, which is to share Christ's love."

Some early adopters of Internet technology as it existed ten or twenty years ago now find themselves struggling to keep up with the latest tools and innovations. Paul Edison-Swift, a long-time communications professional with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for example, has been involved with Ecunet, an online Christian discussion forum, since it was founded back in 1985. Although the community continues to host thousands of ongoing discussions, Edison-Swift said he is worried about Ecunet's difficulty attracting younger members. Elizabeth Hasen, founder the eMinistry Network, which serves mainline Protestant church leaders with over-the-phone ministry classes (a service that might pale in comparison to more visually based online experiences), said, "I'm still thinking in the old paradigm of the way we used to communicate," based on parish newsletters and Sunday morning announcements, rather than, say, Facebook groups. "I don't want to feel like a dinosaur."

While attitudes toward technology are not determined solely by age, other conversation participants pointed to important generational differences. The current generation of teenagers and twentysomethings seem particularly at home with the latest tools and gadgets. Larry Golemon, who directs research at the Alban Institute, noted: "My two mentors in where the Web is headed are my eleven-year-olds."

But the generational differences often run deeper than who owns the latest iPhone. Frank Santoni, codirector of the Catholic Campus Ministry at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, said he finds a generational tension around the issue of privacy and online identity. "What older people perceive as a lack of modesty—posting everything and blogging your whole life—college kids see as just the way they communicate."

Congregational leaders see a different set of challenges. Rick Lord, rector of an Episcopal church in Vienna, Virginia, who has been blogging for the past four years, said he has witnessed a "remarkable transition" in his own congregation as members embrace—and come to expect—digital engagement. "It's a wonderful experience to use technology to enhance our ministry," said Lord. "I have young children friending me on Facebook and college kids sending me theological questions; I wouldn't have had those relationships before."

David Ambrose, the pastor of spiritual formation at a nondenominational evangelical church in Fishers, Indiana, however, said he was concerned with reaching beyond the walls of his own church. "How can we be relevant and speak in a language to a world that doesn't talk in congregational language at all?" he asked.

Wayne Floyd, the manager of educational programs at the Alban Institute, expressed a sense of being overwhelmed by the multitude of new technologies. "I could spend four or five hours a day just looking at all this stuff. How do we manage this wealth of information?" And Jeremy Hinsdale, a technology designer for a public television station and creator of a social bookmarking site on religion, asked how faith groups and individuals could work together so that new online offerings "are not just constant iterations of the same thing?"

The Horse, the Cart, and the Road Ahead

The current crop of Web technologies, which are sure to develop by leaps and bounds in the near future, are powerful tools that, once mastered, can lead to generative ministry and thriving congregations. A congregation that completely ignores new technologies risks becoming irrelevant. "A lot of [religious congregations] are at a crossroads," said Greg Atkinson. "They have to decide whether or not they are going to be digital missionaries who speak the language of our culture."

If this imperative to go digital seems like a tall order, consider this: Just a decade ago congregations were asking similar questions about if and how to erect a basic congregational website. Many congregations saw this option as the choice of the future and dove in, getting their feet wet online and learning through trial and error what flies and what fails for their particular congregation. As of April 2008, more than 60 percent of Protestant churches had websites, a huge increase from 2000, when only one-third had websites, according to a study from the Barna Group. In other words, congregations have mastered new technologies, and they can do it again.

The cliché that there is no one right answer seems particularly apt when trying to figure out strategies in the Web 2.0 world. For one thing, congregation leaders, with a few exceptions, are not technology professionals. And given that so many digital trends were not predicted even by the most astute observers, congregational leaders generally won't be the ones to guess what online utility will be the next YouTube.

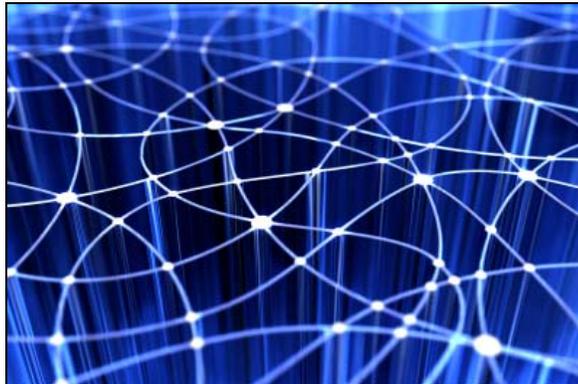
The good news here is that while the challenges can feel frighteningly new, the right answer for a particular congregation will probably arrive the old-fashioned way: as a result of learning, consulting, reflection, and prayer. This process may involve relying on

a knowledgeable member or hiring an outside vendor or simply experimenting with free tools online. Congregational leaders may not be experts at technology, but they can become knowledgeable enough to make a few smart choices.

Ultimately, the tools of technology, like any instruments, must be subservient to the mission of the congregation itself: the horse comes before the cart. But even if your congregation has a clearly defined mission, you may find yourself overwhelmed or confused by the nature of technological change. It's like trying to hitch your horse to the cart, only to find the cart is now a Model T or an SUV or a Japanese hybrid. Suddenly the real-life horse becomes only a metaphor for the new and infinitely more complex process of powering an engine; the horsepower is there, but your actual horse can take a vacation. In other words, these tools are so powerful, can take you in so many new directions, that you may have an entirely new view of your mission once you are in the driver's seat.

So get ready, buckle that seatbelt or tighten the reins, depending on where you are starting from. The road maps are very few, and lots of people will tell you they know exactly where you should be going. As always, there are no shortcuts: each congregation must try and fail and try again in what Missy Daniel, editor for the PBS television program *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, called "a spirit of experimentation." What congregations can bring here is one of their strongest assets: a sense of purpose and meaning and the conviction that, in the midst of uncertainty, a higher power, able to absorb the frustrations and share the joys along the way, is the guiding force.

First we will turn to the origins of religion online.



Religion from Web 0.0 to 2.0 and Beyond

Editor's Overview: In this section, Andrea addresses the history of the Internet, emphasizing that its capacity to promote social networking has existed from the earliest days.

She also offers several tentative definitions of "Web 2.0," citing in particular scholar Heidi Campbell's suggestion that this new iteration makes the Web "a more dynamic and active forum where social networking takes place."

This section delves into the question of what Web 2.0 means for congregations and the ways that congregations inform their members, communicate, worship, and lead one another. Andrea looks at how people have used the Internet to search for religious information, engage in online evangelism, participate in online ritual and worship, and form religious community.

Early Stirrings of Religious Life Online

How did we get here? What is the origin of religion online? It might come as a surprise that 2008 marked a twenty-five-year anniversary of religion online. "We tend to think of it as something new, forgetting there is a history of people doing religion online for two or even three decades," said Heidi Campbell, whose book *Exploring Religious Communities Online* offers a brief history of religion and the Internet and how the two have evolved together.

The Internet began as a Cold War-era project of the U.S. Department of Defense, linking computers together through a new technology called packet switching. When it first went live in late 1969, the ARPANET, as it was known, connected only four university-based nodes, all located on the West Coast. The first e-mail was sent in 1970. Wrote Campbell: "The ARPANET mail system was intended to facilitate research activities, yet users quickly saw that email was a fast and easy way to communicate with coworkers. Correspondence quickly became group conversations as mail and news became the primary motivations for network use." In other words, the social impulse immediately asserted itself.

Heavy e-mail traffic strained the system, and in 1975 the first moderated e-mail group, or Message Service Group (MsgGroup), was set up to develop solutions and standards for e-mail communications. In the late 1970s ARPANET users, all of whom at that time were researchers, used that same format to create groups for non-work-related interest, the first being "SF-LOVERS," for science fiction fans. New operating systems joined the network at that time, including UNIX, and a new program called "newsgroups" gave birth to online discussion groups. In 1983, the group net.religion became the first organized online venue for religion, followed by the creation of net.religion.jewish in 1984. That same year the first denominational foray came from the United Methodist Church, which started CAMNET, a forerunner of the long-running Ecunet.org online community.

What followed from these early e-mailed discussion groups was a flowering of online religious expression, as individuals, congregations, and other religious groups began to establish a digital presence. Often, the creators of these new resources underestimated the popularity of new online religious services. Campbell pointed to the Catholic Church-created website based around the visit to the United States of Pope John Paul II in 1995, which included a venue for people to e-mail prayer requests to the pope. "They thought maybe a couple hundred people would respond," said Campbell. "Within a day, the site was completely jam-packed and they had to remove that function. Neither the Church

nor the Web designers knew how popular that was going to be, or how much people wanted to be in touch [with the pope.]"

Often, early efforts were simply about getting information online. Campbell pointed to the site VirtualJerusalem.com, which first went live in 1997. The site offered Jewish people a range of services, including information about local prayer times and kosher food, as well as a live camera of the Western Wall in Jerusalem and rudimentary social networking features like chat rooms. Many of those features, now updated, continue on the site today, including the option of typing in a prayer that will be printed by volunteers in Jerusalem and inserted into the cracks of the ancient stones in the Western Wall.

Early congregational websites included similar types of features: prayer times, contact information, and often some way to send prayer requests. In broadcasting information to a general and unidentified public, aspects of these sites are now labeled, with hindsight, Web 1.0.

What, Then, Is Web 2.0?

Definitions abound. For some, Web 2.0 is defined by the increasing prevalence of broadband connections or new software tools like JavaScript and AJAX or the mixing and "mashing up" of data from different sources or the idea of the Internet itself as the platform on which an infinite variety of tasks might be performed, thus replacing the role of proprietary software. For others, Web 2.0 is defined by the presence of user-generated content, as people upload their own photos, videos, opinions, reviews, and questions through social sites including Facebook, Flickr and YouTube, rather than simply consuming professionally produced media.

Tim O'Reilly, the Web guru credited with coining the term Web 2.0 in 2004, offers this example to explain how Web 1.0 differs from Web 2.0: the difference between Britannica Online and Wikipedia. One has expert-created, static information published in one-way format online while the other has user-generated, collaboratively written content that is constantly revised and updated.

Heidi Campbell offered her take: "Web 2.0 in some ways is a catchall phrase, a way of thinking about the Web not as a broadcast or information base, but a more dynamic and active forum where social networking takes place." Because interactive forums were present since the dawn of the Internet in the early 1970s, however, Web 2.0 might best be seen as the blossoming and fruition of early trends, part of a continuum of online development toward interactivity.

In elite technology circles, the debate over the next generation of Web technologies and the definition of Web 3.0 is already raging. Web 2.0, then, might simply be thought of as shorthand for "the Web as we know it today." And this Web extends beyond desktops and laptops, now, as an increasing number of devices—in-car GPS systems, cell phones, and video game consoles—are online enabled and further bringing connectivity into our everyday lives.

What's New About Digital Life?

When data is digital, it exists as a sequence of numbers. It can be moved, stored, converted, imported, or deleted. Like a set of stacking crates or an IKEA living room set, the data can be rearranged in all sorts of different forms for different purposes: it is modular. Campbell gave the example of taking a picture with a digital camera. "I can put this image on a T-shirt; I can e-mail it to all my friends; I can change all the colors

or superimpose another image on top of it." While it was possible to do some of these tasks with analog photos—you could make multiple copies and mail them to friends; you could take a negative to a T-shirt printing store—all those jobs can now be quickly and easily completed from a personal computer.

The malleability of information in today's digital new media stands in contrast to the linear nature of analog old media, in which, for example, a television show could only be viewed on TV at a particular time. Today that same show can be reposted online and cut, spliced, and edited by a lay computer user. In other words, information and content now exists in database form: The user decides how and when to consume it, and the definition of user is no longer confined to a professional class with specialized equipment. Media, to put it succinctly, has been democratized. "Old media gives us a window on the world, a set picture. New media gives us a control panel, a way to control the world," said Campbell.

These new capabilities are seeping throughout the culture, "changing our expectations about how we receive and store information," said Campbell. They are also transforming basic structures. "In just the last few years, work has evolved from the place you go to the thing you do," said a 2007 report on alternative work styles for Herman Miller, the Michigan-based office furniture and design firm. Because many of the tasks that could once only be completed at an office during office hours can now be done anywhere on the planet that has an electrical outlet, cell phone reception, and access to a broadband network, the old definitions of work are changing.

What It Means for Congregations

Most religious congregations fit under the old media rubric. Being a congregational member is often synonymous with showing up in person at a certain place at a certain time on a certain day. Similarly, congregations sometimes become so identified with the building housing them that the building becomes the de facto definition of the congregation: "We are people who worship in this place." The content of congregations is not modular; it cannot be easily mixed and matched by individuals to suit their needs, tastes, and schedules.

For decades some congregations have used old media technologies—TV broadcasts of Sunday morning services, for example—to extend their reach, and now multisite churches offer the same content in different locations. At New Life Church in northern Virginia, for example, you can watch the same sermon, preached via video, in a darkened, coffeehouse-style worship service in one town or at another more traditional venue in another town. This type of congregational innovation represents a mix of the values of new media and old media and is one example of how the most cutting-edge congregational practitioners are reshaping not just the look and feel of congregational life, but also the organizational structures.

Also at stake in the new Web 2.0 world are basic questions about authority and how things get done in a congregation. Lisa Colton is director of Darim Online, a nonprofit organization offering Internet strategy consulting and professional development to Jewish organizations. To her, Web 2.0 is a new way of operating. "If your congregation creates a brochure, you can say whatever you want to say, and people will read it. If you have a website or a blog where people can comment, or a Facebook group where anyone can post, it's more of a two-way conversation."

The desire to participate actively as a layperson in everything from congregational decisions to worship itself is what drives people like Jennifer Goen, an assistant organizer of the Gathering of the Beloved in Northern Virginia, out of more traditionally

organized churches. "I attended [a nondenominational megachurch] in Northern Virginia, but I would sit there during the sermon and want to raise my hand and say, 'I have something to add.' There was no room for that," said Goen. "Once you've participated, there's no going back."

Such two-way conversation can disrupt hierarchy, however, and while some like Goen may simply leave old congregations to start new, more participatory ones, others want to move existing communities into a new way of being. For the Jewish organizations Colton works with, she said the participatory aspect of Web 2.0 technology "threatens a lot of traditional assumptions and modes of working that staff and volunteers and board members have been accustomed to for ten or twenty or thirty years. When it comes to bringing a congregation online, it's a transition of mentality as much as it is a transition of technology."

The potential rewards for allowing and encouraging people to engage online, however, are many. If a congregational member can create content online—perhaps uploading photos from an event or posting a comment on a blog—he or she is "empowered," said Colton. "When people have the opportunity to actively participate, that strengthens their identification with the congregation and their relationship to it." Because congregational belonging in the Jewish context is often costly, said Colton, there is a particular need for congregations to deliver a return on investment. "If you only go to Yom Kippur services and don't do anything else, you might ask yourself, 'Why am I paying \$15,000 a year?' and then let your membership lapse. Those members need to be engaged." Whatever the price of membership, however, every congregation has a vested interest in attracting, retaining, and involving members.

The potential costs of ignoring digital culture are many. As Campbell mentions, expectations have changed. If you can check your bank account balance, send a thank-you note, and call a friend online, you certainly expect to find, at the very least, up-to-date information about congregational life. Those capabilities are about Web 1.0-level website design and maintenance: the ability to broadcast information effectively online. Then the question of seeing and experiencing the congregation online needs to be considered. If a congregation's online presence is limited to a static, poorly designed website, "that actually breaks trust," said Colton, who first launched Darim Online in 2000 after finding herself "completely turned off" by the majority of Jewish organizational websites she browsed. "That has repercussions not just for a congregation attracting members, but for individuals being affiliated with a religion at all."

A congregation that fails to engage with technology is also failing to provide leadership in important areas. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, recently pointed to a Barna study showing just nine percent of teenagers learned something "helpful" about technology in their church over the past year. "As each new generation becomes increasingly enmeshed with technology, these discussions and choices cannot be left to chance," said Kinnaman, while launching the Barna Group's 2008 technology study. "Control, image, relevance, immediacy, transparency, purity, truth, stewardship, and escapism are some of the many issues that technology brings to the surface, not always with benign consequences." Helping others navigate this new digital world, then, may be a new aspect of ministry, one that congregations can only embrace when they themselves have engaged in that world.

Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, and Why Generation Gaps Do and Don't Exist

The gap between those who are growing up immersed in digital technology and those who are gradually adapting to it is a significant one, widening sometimes already-wide generation gaps. Coined in 2001 by education writer and game designer Marc Prensky, the term digital natives refers to that first group. Prensky wrote in 2001 that digital natives, a generation that extends upward to include people now in their midtwenties, "have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age." As a result, argued Prensky, these young people "think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors," with profound implications for schools, libraries, employers, and beyond.

As Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, wrote in 2006, natives are multitaskers who not only offer their opinions through reviews and ratings online, but are also more likely than digital immigrants to create their own content online. "More than half of American teenagers have created a blog, posted an artistic or written creation online, helped build a website, created an online profile, or uploaded photos and videos to a website," said Rainie in a 2006 presentation. "They think of the internet as a place where they can express their passions, play out their identities, and gather up the raw material they use for their creations."

Like any neat categorization, however, the digital native, digital immigrant nomenclature obscures gray areas—like the fact that the current generation of thirty- and fortysomethings are somewhere between native and immigrants—and leaves unanswered the question of how the natives' behavior may change and modify over time.

Similarly, the native/immigrant divide can give a false impression that older people cannot be technologically savvy. Immigrants, however, often gain citizenship in this new online landscape, and the religious sphere is no exception. In the 2004 study "Faith Online" from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, for example, nearly half of those who participate in religion in some form online are between thirty and forty-nine.

While some form of generation-based technology divide exists, the most significant differences may be between those who live online and those who go online. Frank Santoni, of the Catholic Campus Ministry at Southern Methodist University, pointed out that for those who live online, including young people, the distinction between online and offline life doesn't hold a lot of water, because those two blend together so completely. "The Internet is simply a tool, a means of communication. If you talk to someone on the telephone, is that 'telephone life' or real life? Obviously, we've come to see the telephone is simply an instrument of communication. That's how young people see the Internet."

Critics, Advocates, and Critical Friends

From the early days of the Internet revolution to today, said Campbell, critics and enthusiasts have been quick to voice their opinions. "Anytime you have a new technology, its advocates are usually the early innovators and those with a vested interest in the technology; they're the ones who are going to say it's the greatest thing since sliced bread. After they have had their say, the pendulum swings to the side and you have the critics. After that, the pendulum tends to swing to the middle and we end up with 'critical friends,' those who see the negative side of the technology but also its potentials and try to hold those two sides in balance."

One of the earlier critics of religion online was Tal Brooke, a Christian countercult leader, who argued in his 1997 book *Virtual Gods* that when human relationships are mediated

over the Internet, they become false. That same year, however, UK-based futurist Patrick Dixon wrote in his book *CyberChurch* that online religion is a vibrant expression of the body of Christ. And shortly thereafter, Christian philosopher Douglas Groothuis came out with what Campbell calls a middle-of-the-road approach in his book *The Soul in Cyberspace*: "He sees the technology as a positive thing, but asks, 'Where is it going to lead us?'"

These cycles of advocacy and criticism continue to play out as new technologies emerge, said Campbell. "Those three voices will always be there in any discussion of church and culture or religion and technology," said Campbell. "That's important to keep in mind when one particular voice becomes very loud."

The pressing questions now are somewhat different. Skeptics are concerned about increasing screen time for people who already spend many hours in front of TVs or computers; in an age when Internet addiction disorder (IAD) may soon be part of the 2012 issue of the authoritative Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), this seems particularly relevant. Others continue to question the authenticity of online relationships. Washington Post columnist Michael Gerson, for example, wrote in October 2007 that friendships formed on Facebook, MySpace, or other social networking sites represent a "rejection of modesty—of restraint and inhibition. People end up treating their own lives as the media treats Paris Hilton's, shining a public spotlight on the most intimate details. . . . It does not seem consistent with building friendship, which involves a gradual accumulation of trust, leading to self-revelation and intimacy." Meanwhile, the technologically enthusiastic continue to tout the personally gratifying, world-changing power of new online tools and concepts.

But a number of institutions have also risen to consider the positives and negatives in a balanced way, including the Texas-based Leadership Network, Gospel Communication Network's Internet Ministry Conference, and Synagogue 3000, which considers some of these issues in a Jewish context. As such institutions and initiatives proliferate and strengthen, so the voice of critical friends may win the day. In the meantime, a balanced view of the plusses and minuses of new technologies can be found only by visiting many sources to weigh differing points of view.

As religion online heads towards its fourth decade, the questions about where religion is going online are becoming more sophisticated. In an earlier stage, said Campbell, "There was an attitude of 'If we build it, they will come.'" Now, there is a more integrated approach, as people become more familiar with what technology can and can't do. Said Campbell, "It's not just about experimenting online, but about how can we really connect the online and offline experiences?"

What Does Religion Look Like Online?

By 2004 a quarter of Internet users were going online to search specifically for religious or spiritual information, making that activity more popular than online banking, online dating, or online gambling at the time, according to a study from the Pew Internet and American Life Project. By 2007, this number had risen to 35 percent of all Internet users. If the definition of "online faithful" is broadened to include people who engage in all kinds of activities online, including sending and receiving holiday cards or e-mails with religious or spiritual content, the number of people engaging with religion online shoots to 64 percent of all Internet users, according to a 2004 study from the same Pew project.

So the Internet represents a vital religious outlet and resource for people in the United States. But exactly what does this online religious activity represent? "Religious

observance is by nature both solitary and communal, and the contribution of the Internet to that space can be confusing," wrote Elena Larsen, author of the 2001 Pew report. "On the one hand, the Internet could be seen as an electronic prayer book, an aid to personal devotion, or a reference guide to spiritual issues without being an actual part of religious observance. On the other hand, an Internet site could be a 'place' where people come together, either to chat or to pray or even to worship with people around the globe who may be at the same site at the same time."

In other words, the Internet serves myriad functions—as a library of content, a utility for getting jobs done (like checking on details of a worship service), or a place to seek out and enjoy community, to name just a few.

Googling God. The most popular religious activity online is searching for religious information or consuming religious content online, activities the 2001 Pew Internet and American Life report dubs "religion surfing." This activity can include searching for information about your own faith or other faiths (for example, plugging in questions like "How to raise interfaith children" or "What do Mormons believe?" into a search engine); listening to, watching, or reading teachings from a religious or spiritual leader; or comparing worship offerings at various local congregations. Other common activities for these surfers in 2001 included e-mailing a prayer request, offering spiritual guidance to others, and downloading religious music.

This group of searchers is varied, Larsen wrote: "Most combine their online life with that of their own religious communities, seeking fuller comprehension and experience of their faith. Some have long ago left their churches, synagogues, or temples, but still use the internet to pursue their own spiritual needs. Some have changed faiths and seek out new information. Some feel isolated for their beliefs, and find communion with others in cyberspace where they cannot find it in their own neighborhoods."

According to a May 2008 study from the Barna Group, downloading religious teachings in audio form—podcasts—is increasingly popular. Nearly one out of every four U.S. adults in the study said they had listened to a religious podcast in the previous week—a pretty astounding figure, especially since podcasting has sometimes been dismissed as radio without the listeners. Evangelical Christians (a term that the Barna Group defines strictly in terms of creed) were almost twice as likely as nonevangelical Americans to access church teachings through podcasts.

As evidence of the diversity of religious audiences online, the twenty most downloaded podcasts on iTunes on a random day in June 2008 included two with religious or spiritual themes: The weekly podcast from Pentecostal preacher Joel Osteen and Oprah Winfrey's "Spirit Channel," in which the talk show host discusses "matters of the soul, spirit and self" with guests such as New Age author Eckhart Tolle.

Internet Proselytizing, Online Ritual, and Digital Communities. Recognizing that many people go online to look for information not just about their own faith but also other faiths, believers have tried to "catch" such surfers with apologetic material and missionary outreach. The 1990s, said Campbell, saw a "real upswing" in the idea of online evangelism: "A lot of people, especially in evangelical communities, said, 'This is the next big thing. Just like we used the printing presses to bring the good news, we need to be online.'"

An early example—and one that's still around in its original Web 1.0 form—is a site called WhoIsJesus-Really.com (answer: "The most influential life ever lived"). A more ongoing effort is Internet Evangelism Day, a yearly volunteer-driven event sponsored by Gospel Communications Network and a number of other evangelical institutions. As the

website explains, "The Internet is changing the world; God is using the Web to transform lives." Nonevangelicals also continue to target people of other faith backgrounds. Muslims, for example, especially since 9/11, have set up websites—such as WhyIslam.org and Islam101.com—specifically targeted at non-Muslims seeking information on Islam.

Another area of vibrant growth and experimentation is online ritual and worship. Cyberpilgrimage is possible through services like those offered at Virtual Jerusalem, Jewish education site Aish.com, or JerusalemWesternWall.com: sending a prayer that will be inserted into the Western Wall in Jerusalem. At Passover, a northern Virginia photographer and blogger continues to offer a cyberseder via webcast—just one example of how such rituals can be extended and experienced online. The Egypt-based Web portal Islam Online in 2007 opened a Virtual Hajj experience on Second Life, which allows visitors to carry out the complex rituals that comprise the Muslim pilgrimage.

In the early 1990s, the First Church of Cyberspace offered the first virtual church service via Internet Relay Chat, said Campbell. That church functioned for fifteen years before recently going offline. Church of Fools, a better-known and more recent experiment, existed for several months in 2004 and attracted high-profile media attention, which in turn boosted visitor numbers as high as eight thousand people a day. The "church" appeared on screen as a three-dimensional cathedral, and visitors appeared as individual avatars, human-looking characters that people can control from their keyboards. Simon Jenkins, editor of the online (and offbeat) Christian humor magazine, Ship of Fools, which created the experience, wrote at the time: "There are some lively theological discussions in the crypt and heartfelt prayers being exchanged. On the minus side are sorties by small groups who want to post racist slogans, religious abuse and experience the joy of shouting '[expletive]!' in a church."

Second Life, currently the most popular and highly developed online virtual world, has opened up a new and rapidly evolving venue for online worship. A Second Life visitor, in the form of a personalized avatar, can attend a discussion group on family history at the LDS (Latter-day Saints) plaza, perform the ritual Muslim prayer at a mosque, attend Bible study at the Anglican cathedral in Second Life, or hang out with other Goth Christians at St. Hilda's Church (a project of the Church of England's Birmingham Cathedral).

Lifetchurch.tv offers weekly services in its Second Life Internet campus, in addition to several real-world locations. Many of these online projects are connected to websites, blogs, or real-world events. As a sign of what a complete world Second Life is for those who "inhabit" it, Second Life users sometimes consider doing something on the Internet outside Second Life to be an offline activity.

The fourth and final category of religious activity online involves religious community. In some sense, community is an aspect of the earlier categories: One can use a search engine to connect with a local religious congregation or to read religious content that has already been aggregated and commented on by members of a community. Missionary activity online is often connected to communities, such as Internet Evangelism Day, which works with already existing congregations and organizations. And virtual-reality-type religious experiences are often about community as well: Each "congregation" on Second Life, for example, is in itself a small community.

Yet online religious communities are so popular and have endured for such a (relatively) long time online that they form their own category of activity. As mentioned earlier, Ecunet.org, an ecumenical Christian community, has been online in some form since 1984. Today it has an estimated forty thousand active members, including six thousand

paying members. Conversation on Ecunet revolves around individual meetings that focus on certain topics. The most popular fifty meetings range from Kitty Pics (photos of cats) to Propertalk (sermon preparation) to 2008 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Draft Discussion (discussion of a proposed denominational document on human sexuality).

Other long-running religion-focused communities include St. Pixels, a community of "Christian and agnostic, traditional and radical, conservative and liberal, young and old," according to its website. The UK-based website is incorporated as a charity and receives major funding and support from the Methodist Church of Great Britain. Beyond these groups, members of nearly every religious group in America—Sikhs, Buddhists, Wiccans—have multiple online venues for community participation.

Religious communities are also found on secular sites. iVillage.com, a popular general-interest site, for example, hosts more than one thousand message boards and includes groups like Methodist Parenting and Jewish Family Life. The pregnancy-related website BabyCenter.com offers a similarly endless list of message boards, including those for Hindu, Muslim, and Christian families of every flavor from conservative to progressive. Beliefnet.com, the leading site on religion, also features message boards on religion-related topics from prayer to food to politics.

Living in and with Web 2.0

The changes we have lived through in the last thirty years are astounding, in terms of how rapidly one innovation has been adopted and has led to another. The most important development, however, may not be the idea of Web 2.0 but what Campbell called the "embeddedness" of technology in everyday life.

"Ten years ago, not everyone had e-mail accounts. Now most of us find it almost impossible to function without the Internet, whether it comes to banking or doing business or keeping up with friends." Religion is no exception, she argued.

Although congregations increasingly rely on online tools to function day-to-day, they generally are not moving as fast as individuals, who are increasingly going online to deepen and enrich their spiritual lives. Campbell finds that religious congregations continue to plan communications "based on a written culture when we're in a digital age." The result is a culture clash in which religious congregations are having debates—Should we be online? What is social networking?—that individuals in the wider society have already resolved.

The capabilities are new and constantly changing, and even those who consider themselves tech-friendly can feel snowed under by new developments. But as we see from our quick trip through the origins of the Internet, many of these developments have been driven by a familiar and easily understandable human impulse: to connect with other people, especially those with whom you have something in common.

Religious congregations are also based around bringing people together for a shared purpose. Because of this close overlap, religious congregations can be both threatened and energized by these developments, and maybe sometimes both. In the next section, we will look at how congregations are already using Web 2.0 and how these technologies present both promises and challenges for religious congregations.

The Challenge and Promise of Web 2.0

Editor's Overview: In this section, Andrea tells stories of real-life communities engaging online, as a way of exploring the pros and cons of the new landscape.

We learn about how a New York City Catholic who rarely attended Mass became more engaged in his local parish because of the connections made with other parishioners on Facebook. We learn about a campus ministry where the official website was largely overlooked in favor of the opportunities for communication offered by Facebook. In addition, there was the Community of Prophecy, which used the Internet to encourage the development of its members' spiritual gifts; the online church that enabled people with disabilities to share their stories and provide mutual prayer-based support; and the Anglican Communion Online, which fostered theological reflections, denominational news, and personal postings.

Andrea discusses how these venues provided six traits people are seeking in online communities: "relationship, care, value, connection, intimate communication, and shared faith." At the same time she addresses the question of whether, or to what extent, online congregations diminish the importance of offline congregations. Along with that concern is the question of whether spiritual and religious identification and growth are becoming too individualized.

The Parish Facebook

Brian Brunius had lived in Manhattan for ten years, and he sometimes, but rarely, attended Mass at his local Catholic parish. "I would go in and leave. I would never hang out to talk or chat," the thirty-eight-year-old TV producer and new-media consultant said. At one point, he put his e-mail address down on a church sign-up list, something he quickly forgot about. About three months later, he received a parish bulletin in his inbox; his e-mail address, along with many others, appeared in the address list. "Within the next twenty-four hours, I got about thirty friend requests on Facebook from people I didn't know and had never met," said Brunius.

Brunius was already a member and active user of Facebook, the social networking utility that has rocketed to mass popularity after it opened to a general audience in 2006. Members can automatically submit their list of e-mail contacts to Facebook, which then displays the people from that list who are already Facebook members. "It turned out all these people who 'friended' me were members of my parish," explained Brunius. When his e-mail had shown up on the mailing list, parish members were easily able to see he had a Facebook profile. Brunius said yes to all the friend requests, a step that allowed him and his new friends to view one another's profiles, which include photos; tastes in movies, books, and films; and countless other opportunities for personal expression.

"Then this little dance started," recalled Brunius. One of his new contacts would send him in an invitation via Facebook for a church event or choir performance or committee meeting. At first he was unsure how to respond: He didn't know if he was being invited personally, or if the person had simply invited all his or her Facebook friends. "But I found myself very likely to click, 'Yes, I will attend,' even though these were people I had never met," he said. While previously Brunius's only parish-related activity was attending Mass, he now found himself at events like a Christmas concert after receiving an invitation from a Facebook friend who was a choir member. "There's no way I would have gone to some of those things if someone hadn't invited me," he said.

Hearing of Brunius's experience, Helen Mildenhall, a faith blogger and manager of OfftheMap.com, a community website for offbeat Christians, pointed out personal

invitations and relationships are what bring people into religious congregations. "What's interesting is that it works online, even when that invitation is coming from someone you don't really know but whom you are 'friends with' on Facebook," she said. This model may have worked particularly well because Brunius was at home on Facebook; it was a venue of genuine connection for him, and he paid attention to what happened in that space.

Brunius said he still doesn't attend Mass regularly, but he goes more than he used to. Belonging to a parish, he said, "has become part of my identity again."

"If I meet someone new at church, I go home and see if any of my Facebook contacts are friends with that person," he said. Because Facebook shows users what friends you share in common with another person, Brunius sometimes discovers that a new acquaintance from church shares mutual friends with him. "When I see we have friends in common, I feel some kind of connection, some sense of possibility. It draws me into a social circle." Brunius said most of the friendships he has through Facebook with parish members have not yet evolved into deep or long-lasting relationships, but this limitation does not trouble him. "My life is full as it is, so I'm not really looking for new friendships. But now the parish has this tiny grab on me, not through the organization itself, but through each of these individual relationships."

Although Brunius works professionally with new media—one of his projects involved creating a website for an order of Catholic sisters—he said this personal experience helped him see the power of online tools for congregations. "A lot of people have been afraid the Internet is going to be a closed space that isolates people and limits real human communication. For me, the experience has been quite the opposite. I am hooked into a community I never knew existed. We had only this one small thing in common: We were all on a mailing list."

This experience of interconnectedness has not always been easy. Two parish members who friended him through Facebook later "de-friended" him and told him why: They said they could not be associated with him because he was gay, a fact they discovered on his Facebook profile. But Brunius said he does not regret having a single space online that brings together people he knows from his past, his personal and professional life, and now his religious life. "It has made me more committed to Facebook. If you're online, it's not possible to hide. I see people doing and saying things through Facebook they would have been ashamed to do ten years ago, so I think that shame is disappearing." Brunius also joined the Facebook group related to his parish as well as a group bringing together Catholics from around New York City. But he eventually left these groups because the volume of messages and invitations was too much to handle.

Self-Organizing Religious Communities. Brunius said he has also been surprised to discover members of his parish who live nearby. "My block in Manhattan has seventeen thousand people. My next-door neighbor might be a parish member, and I wouldn't even know it," he said. Some of the parish members who friended him on Facebook were people he recognized from his neighborhood; while they lived nearby one another, it was Facebook that finally helped them make the connection. Other Internet utilities work on the same principle: making it easier for people to find each other.

While megachurches have successfully used the concept of small groups to channel members into locally based cells, often organized around demographics like age group or marital status, Web 2.0 technologies in many ways allow people to organize themselves. Craigslist, the city-based website for free classified ads, helps people in a particular area find roommates, used furniture, local jobs, and discussions on everything from marriage to atheism to local politics.

Meetup.com, for example, allows progressive Muslims or polyamorous pagans or environmentally conscious Jews to meet up in a certain geographic location. Helen Castro Bodon, a grandmother and member of the Gathering of the Beloved in Northern Virginia, said that the Meetup-based church gave her a faith family. She said, "In this area, with so many military families, people move a lot, and it's hard to make friends."

This ability to self-organize can also undercut traditional ways of doing things: Often paid congregational staff have de facto control over the publication of events or discussions. Helen Thompson Mosher, a faith blogger and social media strategist, notes that congregations who don't create Facebook groups may be surprised to find a congregant has already done so. "If you don't do it, someone else will do it without you knowing it."

Brunius said that while his parish, the mother church for the Paulist ministry, has a tradition of embracing communication technology, other Catholic leaders in the city have been more wary. "They see the potential this technology has for undermining the hierarchical system of the church. They don't like being out of control," he said.

Just as the advent of e-mail and voice mail have in many cases obviated the need for secretaries, so too new technological tools allow some communities to do away with large portions of institutional bureaucracy. A Meetup group, for example, costs about ten dollars a month to maintain while offering a simple way to invite new members, advertise, manage events, and keep group members in contact with one another. The barriers to creating a religious community—or a community within a community, as in Brunius's case—are now fewer.

Digital Reflections of Mobile Lives. To Heidi Campbell, new ways of relating and forming communities are part of broad, profound changes in the way we live. "In contemporary society most people do not live in densely knit, tightly bound communities; rather, they are found floating in sparse, loosely bound, frequently changing networks," she wrote in her 2005 book. And within our loosely bound existence, we seek out "small-scale, self-selected homogeneous communities" based around particular interests or identities, she said.

The nature of our relationships and community affiliations today has much to do with the high level of mobility that shapes American life. For every two marriages that took place in 2005, one ended in divorce, according to statistics from the National Center for Health Statistics; remarriages and blended families, sometimes with children commuting between them, are redefining what family means. Even as international adoption becomes more common, reproductive technologies are shifting the definition of parenthood, as a couple may give birth to a child conceived from the gametes of strangers from another state.

On the residential front, people in the United States move on average every five years, according to U.S. census data. And in the business world, a job or even a career is not a lifetime commitment. Young baby boomers, for example, held an average of 10.5 jobs between age eighteen and forty, according to data from the U.S. Department of Labor. Finally, people in the United States are mobile even in their religious lives, moving not only from congregation to congregation but also leaving or switching affiliation and in many cases joining new denominations or religions altogether. According to the 2008 Religious Landscape Survey from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 44 percent of American adults have changed their religious identity at some point in their lives.

In a time marked by marital, social, economic, and religious mobility, then, we are not wholly defined or circumscribed by our hometown or education or religious identity at birth. Rather than have community forced upon us, we are largely free to choose who we want to relate to and how we want to relate to them. The result is that each person is at the center of a number of interrelated "personal communities," said Campbell.

A moment of reflection may help this observation ring true in your own life. When you think of your friends and family, these people are most likely flung across the country if not around the world. You know these people for different reasons: some you went to school with or worked with or belonged to some club with. In your current life, you may have a circle of friends and acquaintances from various parts of your life: neighbors who live nearby, perhaps fellow parents from a school or activity your child takes part in, friends from a religious congregation or political group, people you know from work.

We belong simultaneously to multiple, sometimes overlapping communities, only a few of which are geographically bound.

"The ebb and flow of our networks are just embodied and mirrored online," said Campbell. Because you can keep up vibrant relationships online with people who live far away—Campbell reported that her twin sister lives across the country from her, but they interact online everyday—you may have less need for in-depth relationships in your current geographical area. "People use the Internet not to retreat but to extend their ability to communicate. Because of the demands of modern work life, and because we probably don't live in the same geographic location as important people in our lives, this is a natural progression. Online relationships are just a part of our daily life."

Connecting Individuals within Congregations. Problems arise when religious communities plan around outdated assumptions. "A lot of congregations aren't aware of all these changes, which are taking place simultaneously," said Campbell. "They don't realize how people live their lives. They are still planning parishes with a geographic model in mind, not realizing that we now live in a nongeographic, networked world." In the case of Brunius's parish, geography is still relevant—the parish is defined by thirteen city blocks—but simply belonging to the same parish does not automatically create ties that bind. Finding a point of contact or affinity is essential for building relationships and community in the networked age.

Colton, of Darim Online, spoke of a large congregation that launched an online discussion board, featuring a different topic each month and an experienced moderator drawn from the congregation. One month, said Colton, the theme was caring for people with Alzheimer's disease, moderated by a congregational member who was a geriatric psychologist. "Maybe nine people engaged with the discussion group," she said. "These people probably had sat near each other at synagogue or had children in the same Hebrew class, but they didn't know they all were wrestling with the same spiritual issues about caring for elderly parents. The discussion group gave them a chance to support one another." Colton said some of the discussion board members realized they had parents in the same nursing home facility, "and they would drop in on the other parents and post in an online message, 'I saw your father today.'"

These affinities don't need to be long lasting to be meaningful, she added. "In five years, maybe most of those parents will have passed away, and the people may drift apart from one another because they no longer have that in common, but at that moment they were there for each other." That kind of connection, said Colton, gives her goose bumps, because it shows how technology can facilitate the connections that are the "essence of success" for a congregation. "In a congregation of 2,500 people, there are

maybe five people dealing with your same issues," she said. "The question is, how do you find those people? It's very challenging. But the technology can make it easy."

Merging Identities Online. As Brunius's story reveals, meeting people where they are—in his case, on Facebook, rather than at the parish coffee hour—raises issues of privacy and identity. Brunius did not attempt to hide the fact that he was gay on his Facebook page. And his desire to let all aspects of his identity be known to those who friended him from the parish is part of what Colton sees as a larger trend. "People today create and evolve their multiple identities concurrently. We used to see people who simply focused on being Jewish in a Jewish context, like running a Jewish club at school or attending services. Now they want to bring that Jewish identity with them out into the world. We want to be known as an individual with multiple identities." Campbell added that while these multiple identities to some extent have always been part of the human experience, "the technology allows us to visualize them in new ways."

But not everyone may be happy with a trend toward publicly displaying the different, and perhaps sometimes conflicting, aspects of their identity. Just as many people on Facebook are uncomfortable being friended by their boss or a parent, some may want to keep their multiple identities separate.

An analogy from the business world is apt here. Comfort levels in blending work and life identities on the job fall along a continuum, according to Nancy Rothbard, a management professor at the Wharton Business School who studies work and life interaction. She discovered in her research, for example, that some people prefer to maintain fairly strict boundaries between work and their personal lives. When these strict separators work in settings where the mixing of work and life is encouraged—with the option to work at home, for example, or liberal policies toward office romance—these people demonstrate lower levels of commitment to and satisfaction in their jobs.

So while inhabiting a single identity all the time appeals to many because of its promise of authenticity or wholeness, it is not for everyone.

Needs-based Congregations? In this age of loosely bound lives in which each person maintains multiple networks of different affinities, religious congregations may be losing a certain amount of authority, said Wayne Floyd, manager of the Alban Institute's education department. In earlier times, as recent as a generation ago, he said, people privileged four communities in their lives: work, family, civic community, and religious congregation. "Today, people have so many other affinities; we're not longer in the silos that constrained us," he said. "It's disturbing and disorienting if you once lived in a world with those authoritative centers, and they no longer hold sway. Today people are growing up in a world never having experienced an authoritative center."

In meeting people where they are, then, in recognizing and celebrating multiple aspects of people's identities, are religious congregations somehow ceding their importance? Does belonging to a congregation become simply an aspect of identity rather than a defining commitment?

This focus on congregations meeting individual needs reflects a changing notion of membership, Claudia Greer, an associate of the Congregational Resource Guide, said. "The 1950s model was you joined a church, became a member, and that's where your whole religious life took place," she said. "Now there is a more fluid understanding of participation, and it doesn't always involve formal membership." Greer offered herself as an example, noting that while she worships at one church, she often attends Sunday school at a different church, one that is vitally committed to adult faith formation. "I'm

wondering if online religious conversation encourages people to participate in this way," taking what they need from different venues, she said.

"I've attended twenty churches in the last four years. I'm not even sure which one I formally belong to," said blogger Helen Thompson Mosher. Jan Edmiston, blogger and pastor of Fairlington Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, said Mosher's membership profile is not uncommon: "Half the people at our worship services are not members on the rolls. People under age thirty, certainly under twenty-five, couldn't care less about being a member of a church." As a result, said Edmiston, congregational language should shift away from a focus on counting church members. "Instead, we should emphasize people making a commitment to God through this congregation."

Campbell pointed out that Greer's experience of attending more than one church was not uncommon. "Some call it, 'pick-and-mix spirituality,'" she said. "This is the trend in North America: that people relate to congregations in a needs-based way." It can also appear disturbingly commercial. "This seems like part of consumer culture, of customers looking to fill their needs, and part of me recoils at that," said John Dale, former coordinator of social and justice ministry programs at Trinity Church in Boston. "I don't know if a church is supposed to be like a grocery store or a shopping mall. I think it's supposed to require more of a commitment and go beyond the surface culture."

While some see this approach as a shallow attempt to cater to a consumer culture, others see it as positive. At the Gathering of the Beloved in Northern Virginia, for example, a number of involved members simultaneously and openly belong to other religious congregations. One man, for example, said he attends an Anglican church to sing in the choir and attends the Gathering for the close fellowship. Whatever value judgments congregations may place on the importance of membership and fidelity to a certain congregation or denomination, all face a similar reality: that many Americans maintain multiple religious identities and communities at the same time and that online technologies are mirroring and perhaps even magnifying those patterns.

So Many Wishing Me Happy Birthday!

Frank Santoni, thirty-four, is codirector of Catholic Campus Ministry at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas, Texas (where, he reported, "there are more Catholics than Methodists"). The ministry has a smartly designed, easy-to-navigate website, SMUCatholic.org, with current links, bios, Mass times, and other relevant information. But Santoni said none of the students ever use it. Why? Because they are involved with the ministry almost entirely through Facebook. "The website is mostly used by parents or donors or people outside the university," said Santoni. "Some of our most involved students have never even seen the website."

Santoni's story is an example of how a Web 1.0 technology—a website with information formally collected and presented by paid staff members—can be left in the dust as Web 2.0 technology takes off. The effect is exaggerated in this case because it is taking place among college students, who are currently part of the new hyperwired generation. But Santoni argued that as these students get older, they will bring their digital expectations with them.

The Catholic ministry at SMU started using Facebook regularly when a recent alumnus worked as an intern with the ministry. "He used Facebook like you or I use e-mail; he was on there all the time, sending people messages." But Santoni—who had never seen e-mail himself when he started college in 1993—said no formal decision to start using Facebook or phone-based text-messages in the campus ministry was made. "Nobody really took the lead: It just happened, because it's how students communicate now."

Just four years after Facebook was first created by a Harvard undergraduate, students involved in the SMU Catholic ministry "use it in every possible way you can think of," reported Santoni. Inviting students to events, scheduling lectures and Eucharistic minister rotations, and posting content from Santoni's blog all take place via SMU Catholic ministry's Facebook group and the broader networks of friendship that link students together online.

In late May, for example, a ministry staff member posted an item asking for input on possible new times for Mass. Within three days, thirteen students had replied with their feedback. With e-mail, this process would have been more cumbersome, involving back-and-forth messages that clutter in-boxes. The Facebook group instead offered an always-on community bulletin board where members could not only post their own content but also read what others had to say. And of course, a user can click on people and learn more about them or friend them or see if they have friends in common—interactions not possible on e-mail. As Brunius said of Web 2.0 technologies, they are built on many of the same functionalities of earlier tools, "but they offer a much richer experience."

"We're not doing anything magical other than using what the students are already using," said Santoni. Students rarely if ever check their university-issued e-mail accounts, because these will only contain "junk mail from the administration and some club they signed up for three years ago during orientation and forgot about. If you want to cut through the clutter," said Santoni, "you go to Facebook, because that's where their real identity is."

For this ministry, then, Facebook is an essential tool for communication. And with strong communication comes the potential for strong community. "We're not creating community so much as deepening it. Facebook allows us to be a community in a lot of different ways," said Santoni.

A simple example is birthdays. Facebook members are reminded when a Facebook friend has a birthday; a couple of clicks allow the user to send a birthday greeting. "I've never had so many people wish me happy birthday," said Santoni, who also turns these quick messages into ministry opportunities. "Sometimes I'll get a birthday message from a student who is not that plugged in to the ministry. That's an opportunity for me to follow up and say, 'Hey, how are you doing?'" Similarly, when Santoni sees a friend has a birthday, he uses that excuse to be in touch and invite him or her for a cup of coffee or lunch. "That's a really fruitful way to strengthen those connections."

"I do a fair amount of cyberstalking," admitted Santoni, tongue in cheek. If he sees a student at Mass that he doesn't know well, for example, he'll look up the person's profile on Facebook. "I use that to figure out who he's connected to, and what interests or friends we have in common."

But Santoni said he is also careful to respect students' privacy on Facebook. While he will accept friend requests from students, he has a policy of not sending his own friend requests to students. "My impulse is to let it be their space. If they don't know me well, I don't want to creep them out by friending them too early. The more the grown-ups move in, the more likely they are to find another space."

Recently, Santoni has also noticed that students are more likely to up the privacy settings on their Facebook pages, which restrict nonfriends from accessing their information. Indeed, industry analysts have noted that since Facebook opened up to noncollege students in 2006, and the age of users has crept upwards, young people

have increasingly migrated toward new and smaller social networking sites. While Facebook may not be a here-today, gone-tomorrow tool, Santoni said he already sees communication patterns among students changing as mobile devices, like Apple's iPhones, grow more and more sophisticated.

The idea behind the popular site Twitter.com, for example, which allows for 140-character-long "microblogs," is an adaptation of a Facebook feature of typing in your status—your current activity or musing—which is then broadcast to your list of contacts. Facebook is the tool of the moment, but in a year or two years, another tool may replace it, and that tool may be one inspired by a previous trend.

As Santoni's students graduate and search for Catholic community life beyond the confined space of a university, one can easily imagine their difficulties adjusting to life in the average parish. "Clearly young graduates will feel more at home in a parish that uses Facebook, not because it's a sign of coolness, but because that's how they are going to be reached, that's where they are."

What's the Website For? One of the first questions raised by Santoni's ministry experience has to do with websites. If his ministry's website wasn't being used by its main constituents, what was the point of maintaining it at all?

David Bourgeois, an information technology professor at Biola University in Southern California, recently wondered aloud on his blog, "Lessons from Babel," whether the idea of churches pouring all their digital energy into a single, all-encompassing website is now obsolete, particularly when such websites must be redesigned every few years (or even months) to keep pace with changing online conventions. Perhaps, he wrote, content should be set free from the confines of a single website.

"What I mean is this: for each type of content we want to make available, we should find the appropriate tool and use it. Then we should allow those who are consuming our content to view it in any way that they would like," he wrote. Rather than creating a calendar on a website, he suggested, why not use a Web-based Google calendar that would allow users to "integrate it into their personal calendar, bring it in to their 'home page' via an RSS reader [a digital syndication system], or just view it directly?" A youth pastor could keep up with his or her members through a blog hosted on a free blog platform, which can be viewed through a Web browser, an RSS feed, or a Facebook feed.

Other organizations have experimented with this idea. In 2007, for example, one of the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Middle East correspondents, Ben Hammersley, began broadcasting his reporting not only through the BBC's usual radio and TV channels, but also through his blog, Flickr (the photo-sharing site), and YouTube, in addition to submitting content to social bookmarking sites like Digg. "By using external tools we're able to do very interesting things very quickly without resorting to any enormously long development time. It's about being part of the web, rather than on the web," said Hammersley at the time. Rather than requiring potential visitors to come to BBC channels, the BBC went to potential viewers through these popular online channels.

Of course, Bourgeois backed off and agreed that all churches do need websites, but he suggested that perhaps these websites should in fact be an aggregation of other tools, a place to find links to external blogs, Facebook groups, YouTube channels, and other resources. Paul Steinbrueck, author of the Christian Web Trends blog at OurChurch.com, commented on Bourgeois's idea, reminding readers that when people begin "shopping" for a new church, they usually begin online, hence the need for a quality website. And

indeed, SMU Catholic ministry does have a solid website—one that mainly serves an outside audience.

Steinbrueck also noted, however, that because some people who attend a church either don't understand Web 2.0 tools ("What is a Facebook group?") or are not familiar with the church's various ministries, it makes sense to continue publishing all church information through the single organ of a website. Yet the distributed model of communications has a great appeal in that people can get the information they need in the form they want it: A young person doesn't want to see the vestry's financial report, and vestry members probably don't need to know what time the pizza-and-movie teen get-together starts.

The distributed model may help resolve a basic issue that many congregations struggle with: Who exactly is the audience for a congregational website? Is it the already-bought-in members who want to stay updated and informed about one another? Or is it outsiders who might be invited in? Paul Edison-Swift, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, said he feels this tension in his own church's website. "How can we express to others the exciting vitality and interesting people and wonderful work going on? It's hidden behind the congregation doors," he said.

But before jumping onto the latest tool—in this case, perhaps, Facebook—remembering why Facebook works for Santoni's ministry is important: It is the tool that everyone he is trying to reach is using. If a church installed a phone long before anyone else had the phone, what would be the point? There would be no one to call. Once everyone—or at least a good number of people—had phone numbers, then it would make sense to invest in creating phone trees or conference calls or other phone-based utilities. The challenge, then, is to find a set of tools that congregational members (or potential members) are either already using or can easily be persuaded to start using.

Accelerating the Impulse to Know Others. In a sense, college campuses as the venue that gave birth to Facebook seems strange. After all, residential university life allows students to see each other constantly, and one's friends usually live a short walk across campus. But Santoni pointed out that Facebook is not always about bridging geographical boundaries. "The genesis of Facebook is rooted in our desire to learn more about those we live in close proximity to," he said.

When Santoni was in college, students were issued a directory, often called "the facebook," that included pictures, hometowns, and other bits of information about other fellow students. The digital version of this analog facebook vastly accelerates the process of getting to know your classmates, said Santoni. "You can click on one person's picture and see who they are friends with. If you are friends, then you can see their whole profile, including even what classes you might have in common."

Technologies like social networking sites "accelerate the human activity we're already inclined to do, for better or for worse," said Santoni. From a religious point of view, Internet searches puts problematic viewpoints in easy reach, along with sinful activities like viewing pornography. But when the human impulse is positive, that urge is accelerated as well, he said. "I don't think I've ever heard people quote from a papal encyclical as much as from the last one," he said. "It's so easy for people to go right to the source now."

Once this power and speed is at your fingertips, it can be hard to revert to analog ways of getting jobs done. If you are used to driving a car to work, being forced to walk might feel like an extreme hassle or even an outrageous expectation. That may be the experience young people have when they leave tech-enabled campus ministries and

enter more traditional, less tech-oriented congregations. Instead of easily being able to connect with others or finding others who communicate through their favorite "channels," they may feel like they have time-traveled back a decade or two.

Online Religious Communities

Online communities are an enduring aspect of online life, having existed now for more than twenty years. They also represent one of the most pointed challenges to traditional congregational life. Many such communities don't fit easily into Web 1.0 or Web 2.0 definitions. While displaying the interactivity, dynamism, and user-generated content of Web 2.0, many have relied and continue to rely on Web 1.0 tools like e-mail for their basic structure.

Heidi Campbell spent four years in the late 1990s and early 2000s researching three such communities and found that while members of these groups did not abandon their local congregations, they were often driven to seek out community online because of needs unmet by those same local congregations. She wrote, "The [online] groups which were most active and animated were those that had started at a grassroots level, led by individuals rather than religious institutions or organizations."

Three Communities, Three Stories. Started in 1994, the Community of Prophecy (a pseudonym) was founded by a California technology professional who said she felt called by God to start an e-mail list focused on the Pentecostal gift of prophecy. The aim was to provide a safe place for a "kinship of people . . . to encourage each other and to build up each other in our prophetic gifting," according to the group's website and introductory e-mails. While members lived primarily in North America, some lived as far afield as Hong Kong and Paraguay.

Via e-mail and chat rooms, members participated in prophetic training courses, run by the group's leadership, that involved reading and discussing articles. As part of the learning process, members sometimes broke into small or one-on-one groups where they interacted online and reported their conversations back to the main group. Members could also post their prophetic revelations and receive feedback on them from other members. Drop-in discussion sessions and worship meetings were held in chat rooms, allowing for real-time prayer and discussion. For those wanting more intensive teaching, members could sign up for one-on-one chat sessions with members of the leadership team.

The rules of the community were clearly explained and enforced. As the group's charter stated, "No discussion will be permitted in this conference that questions the basics of the Christian faith. . . . They are assumed fundamental and agreed upon by all participants." Similarly, the forum was a not a place for debating whether or not God actually offered prophecy to individuals; that was assumed to be true. When each new member joined, they received an e-mail urging them to continue to follow the leadership of their own pastor and to inform that pastor about being involved in the online community. Members were also warned the list "is not a support group for emotional or mental problems and is not a place to dump problems that are unrelated to the prophetic gifting." It was, then, a hierarchical community with a rule-enforcing leadership and one that explicitly recognized the importance and authority of local congregations.

Within those boundaries, however, intimacy flourished. When Campbell interviewed members, they referred to the Community of Prophecy as an "online congregation" and called fellow members "brothers" or "sisters." While the leadership kept discussion within theological limits, they also encouraged members to share their personal lives.

When one member hinted he was feeling depressed and might quit the group as a result, other members replied immediately, offering support and urging him to remain in the group. A week later, he was back online, thanking members for their support: "You have blessed me both in public and private messages, in the natural [material world] things haven't changed, however, I see those 'chariots all around me.'" Though he was still suffering in some ways, then, the community support helped him perceive God's presence.

When a single member of a congregation is publicly supported and encouraged, this can have ripple effects on others—and this effect may be magnified online. "Support of this nature may not always be this visible in a local church environment; hence an online environment can seem to be more carrying and supportive," wrote Campbell.

While online relationships strike some believers as theologically hollow, lacking in essential face-to-face contact, in this case, members of the Community of Prophecy perceived spiritual meaning in relationships veiled by a screen and hidden from direct perception. "Cyberspace, as unseen virtual space, may be conducive for this type of community function, as it creates an 'other-worldly' environment," wrote Campbell. Members spoke to her of God's hand at work in assembling such a diverse community and reported believing that their online support and teaching network would lead to renewal in the broader Christian community. Indeed, a number of the community's leaders founded offline components to their ministry, and the list's founder went on to become ordained as a Baptist minister and establish her own prophetic ministry.

While the Community of Prophecy was focused primarily on the development of a specific spiritual gift, the online church, the second group that Campbell studied, existed almost entirely to provide emotional and prayer-based support for its Christian members, the majority of whom lived with sensory disabilities such as blindness, partial-sightedness, and deafness. "On the Internet, nobody knows you are blind, physically challenged, male or female," wrote Campbell.

The group, which ranged between thirty and seventy members of varying denominational backgrounds, was founded in 1990 by Stuart, a Christian who is blind, who told Campbell he had met many people online in chat rooms who did not belong to a congregation but who still considered themselves Christian. "Lots of them had had bad experiences, had hurt feelings, . . . or [had] become confused about what the church was all about, and I thought the [online church] could help bridge that gap if there was one."

Some of the group's members felt they had been badly treated because of their disability. One member told Campbell how she tried to attend a new church, and when she got disoriented and headed off in the wrong direction, nearby church members stood by watching but not helping, she learned later. Another group member asked for support as she struggled to get her family to recognize her as an adult in spite of her disability. A flood of e-mail messages came back as members offered prayers, encouragement, and stories of their own similar experiences. As one member explained to Campbell, the group "is a community who not only cares but understands what blind Christians in particular are going through. . . . I don't know that a local church could do any better."

And while the founder described the community as "poor substitute" for a face-to-face congregation, all the members Campbell surveyed reported that online prayer was "equally effective and meaningful as prayer from a friend or church member."

The Anglican Communion Online, also known as St. Sam's Cyber Parish, offered still another version of online community, one focused around a shared religious identity. First founded in 1988 as an informational e-mail service, the list evolved into a discussion group. At the time Campbell studied it, the community had a consistent membership of between four- and five-hundred members, all of whom are in some way connected to the Anglican or Episcopal churches around the world.

Discussion content ranged from the chatty to the theological. In her first week of studying the group, for example, Campbell found discussions "on topics ranging from homosexuality in the church, baseball, use of the f-word, and the educational level of Episcopal Bishops." In addition to sharing theological debates, moments of personal reflection, and denomination news, list mates also shared puns, jokes, and funny stories, bringing a recreational aspect to the group not found in the other two communities. The list moderator served not as an enforcer of community standards, as in the prophetic e-mail community, but rather as a kind of technical overseer: the job of explicating community norms fell instead to the most devoted and regular posters.

Some members found the sheer number of postings—averaging between seventy-five and one hundred a day—to be overwhelming at times. One member wrote to the group that he quit the list three times in his two years of membership, in part because of e-mail volume, but added, "I've always rejoined because I miss the people, I miss the banter, I miss learning new things, and I miss what's happening in the lives of my listmates."

While members of the other two groups did sometimes meet face-to-face, either as a group or one on one, the Anglican cyber parish offered the most opportunity for list mates to meet one another offline. Many of these opportunities arose naturally as members gathered for denominational events, like conferences or the installations of new bishops. These meetings were celebrated and documented online, as in one case Campbell recounted in which a laptop was passed around a table so that members could immediately share their thoughts and experiences with the wider online community.

Because the group shared a denominational identity, learning that the majority of group members surveyed said they were active members of their local congregations is not a surprise; a large number of the members were clergy members, church leaders, or volunteers with important responsibilities in their parishes. "For most members, the AC [Anglican Communion Online] is identified as a complement or supplement to the local church," wrote Campbell. One member described the group as a companion parish, enabling her to deepen her church connections.

The Limits of Online Religion. One of Campbell's central findings was that actively participating in online community "creates a desire for individuals to take relationships beyond the screen," she said. Members of the Anglican Communion Online demonstrated a particular interest and ability in getting together offline, and part of the motivation, said Campbell, was to celebrate the Eucharist together. "That was one thing they couldn't do together online, and it is a really important part of the communal experience of being Anglican."

Campbell also described how members of the Community of Prophecy would host meetings and conferences around the world, such as one meeting she attended near an airport where the members of the list rented a room so that they could meet and worship together in Pentecostal, prophetic style with the list moderator who had a six-hour flight layover in the area.

The necessity of these real-world gatherings demonstrates the lasting importance of face-to-face religiosity, said Larry Golemon, a research associate at the Alban Institute. "The sacramental traditions constantly remind us there are limits to how much can be expressed in the 2.0 world," he said. "The church offers embodiment, and the Web cannot. There are just plain limits," he said.

Campbell called that limitation "the chocolate-chip cookie factor." If an online friend is struggling, and he or she lives on the other side of the country or the world, you can't send them chocolate-chip cookies as an encouragement through an e-mail (though of course you could order gourmet cookies for them online and have them shipped overnight). "People still want that embodied context," said Campbell. "They still want to give someone a real hug."

And perhaps what is more important for religious people, sacraments such as Mass or rituals such as Friday Muslim prayer cannot (yet) be fully experienced online. Some Muslims for example have debated whether or not having one's avatar on Second Life perform one of the five required daily prayers actually counts. One Swedish Muslim who regularly visits Second Life resolved the issue by concluding that only his real-life prayer is religiously valid, but that his Second Life prayer is religiously symbolic.

Blogger Helen Thompson Mosher said that in her experience, many online communities naturally reinvent face-to-face communities. "Many folks who get involved in these communities still crave one-on-one interaction," she said. She pointed to Second Life conventions, for which virtual world participants often travel across country just to meet offline with fellow SL residents. Congregations, said Mosher, can take advantage of people's "craving for community and physical interaction" by making space available. "It's not so much 'build it and they will come,' as being the steeple around which people gather," she said.

Are People Looking Online for What They Can't Find Offline? The two other central findings from Campbell's research seem to contradict one another. On the one hand, she said, interacting online in many cases prompted people to return to or to rediscover offline congregations. "If anything, it solidified their faith," said Campbell. "It was another avenue of participation." But at the same time, members of the three online groups were clearly seeking online for qualities they wanted, but didn't find, in their local congregations. Some told Campbell they simply felt "more cared for" online.

Campbell identified six traits people are looking for in online communities: relationship, care, value, connection, intimate communication, and shared faith. These traits "aren't all that surprising," she said. "That's what most people are looking for in any kind of community." What's surprising, or perhaps just difficult for some to hear, is that people said they found those qualities lacking in their experiences of offline congregations.

Campbell described her own experience at a church in Scotland to demonstrate the point. "In the middle of my research, I went to a Good Friday service at the Episcopal Cathedral in Edinburgh. I sat where I typically sat when I visited the cathedral, fully participating in the service, but I left feeling very alone. Except for the passing of the peace, there was no social interaction," she said. "After that, I tramped up to the computer lab at the theology school. I logged onto a chat room for one of the groups I was studying.

Suddenly I was interacting with fourteen or fifteen people from all over the world, and we were praying together. Being there in the computer lab by myself, I felt very connected. And yet when I was at the church, surrounded by people, I felt very alone,"

she said. "Sometimes online and offline experiences are the difference between being together alone verses being alone together."

What was most satisfying for members of these communities was something few offline congregations can offer: large groups of people who share similar interests or backgrounds.

A local congregation, for example, may offer care and fellowship to a blind Christian, and may even have one or two blind members, but would probably not be able to offer the understanding online group members sought so avidly from one another. "They found a safe place where people were judging them based on the content they wrote, not on their physical limitations," said Campbell.

An elderly librarian who participated in the Anglican group told Campbell how the online group fulfilled her desire to talk intensively about theology with others. A local congregation, she said, could only offer "a handful" of others who shared that interest. Through the Anglican group, she met not only hundreds of people interested in theology, but also hundreds of people with experience in different churches and different countries.

Do Online Congregations Diminish the Importance of Offline Congregations?

Campbell's research lays to rest the vexing idea that expressing religious or spiritual life online necessarily comes at the expense of local congregational life. To use a cliché, the relationship between offline life and online life is not either-or; it is both-and. But the both-and arrangement brings an entirely new set of questions: What does it mean that religious people are finding religious fulfillment online?

To examine this question, imagine for a moment a baseball-loving spouse perennially frustrated that her husband either won't attend games with her or sighs with boredom if he does agree to come along. Then imagine this woman makes a friend who loves baseball: Now the two of them attend games together all the time. In one sense, this could seem like a great development. Because the wife now has an alternative outlet for her passionate interest in baseball, this relieves stress on the marriage. The wife gets her baseball fix, she no longer guilt-trips her husband about his nonappreciation of baseball, and the husband is free to pursue his own interests.

On the other hand, this also changes the relationship. Maybe the spouses spend less time together. Maybe the wife's discovery of a new friend is a first step toward realizing how little in common she has with her husband and how much happier she is away from him. If the wife had no option but to continue pressuring her husband to attend baseball games, perhaps the couple would have reached a workable, maybe even transformative, compromise.

The new option changes the equation of the original relationship. Think of a congregation where a parishioner is dissatisfied with the content of Sunday morning sermons, finding them too ideological or boring or simply not relevant to his life. Now he can go online and listen to sermons from any number of preachers; he can even click on a sermon with a particular title that interests him. Again, this solution to the problem can cut both ways. On the one hand, the parishioner may be more satisfied on Sunday mornings; he can sit through a boring sermon because he knows he can listen to an interesting one on the radio while driving home or on his iPod while working out on the treadmill.

On the other hand, the congregation as a whole may have lost something vital: the constructive dissatisfaction of a member. Maybe if the parishioner had continued to

insist on more interesting preaching, the board would have eventually sent the pastor for a training course on preaching or found some other solution that addressed the root cause and benefited the congregation as a whole.

The Future is Not Guaranteed. While the need for face-to-face events is an obvious one, that fact alone does not guarantee that geographically based, brick-and-mortar religious congregations will continue to be the center of religious life. As a point of comparison, a very similar discussion is taking place right now in the newspaper industry, where declining advertising revenues, circulation numbers, and share prices are threatening the existence even of large and successful newspapers. Journalists and newspaper lovers often say, in a protesting voice, "But there will always be a need for quality reporting."

That observation is true, yet it alone is not enough to sustain an industry whose underpinnings have been washed away or at least very seriously eroded by online utilities. Quality reporting may endure in some form or another, but that does not guarantee newspapers will.

Similarly, religious people everywhere are drawn toward one another, and that impulse does not seem to have dimmed in any way. Indeed, Campbell estimated the people who belonged to the online communities she studied spent an average of twelve hours a week interacting with those communities, and at times some even drove up to twelve hours to meet with fellow community members in person at different times. But just because there remains a need for religious congregations does not mean the church on the corner will necessarily continue unchanged in the digital age.

Clayton Christensen, the Harvard Business School management professor known for his work on innovation, has advised newspapers to think about their mission in terms of what jobs people need to get done. In the past, if you wanted to find a new job or sell your car or hire a babysitter, you consulted your local newspaper's classified section. Today you would probably use craigslist, Monster.com, or any number of other websites, many of them free. If you want to know what events are happening this weekend, or how the weather is going to be—again, the newspaper no longer has a monopoly on helping you get those tasks completed.

In the digital age, geographically based congregations are principally important because they provide a venue for face-to-face interaction. However, seeing congregations as filling a specific need is different from seeing congregations as taken-for-granted community institutions that will always exist. The very fact that you find yourself justifying the need for congregations means the context has already changed.

Greg Atkinson, the Church 2.0 teacher and writer, articulates a new ethos that many others share. "Church is wherever two or more people are gathered to worship God," he said. "It takes place in buildings, schools, theatres, shopping centers, apartments, prisons, basements and coffee shops across the country and around the world; it happens online and in Second Life. It happens wherever people gather." And with a growing number of online utilities that make community organizing simple and cheap, the imperative to have a building as an organizing principle becomes less urgent.

Networked Individualism and Religious Life. One area Campbell said she would like to see religious leaders pay attention to is the question of online individualism. She pointed to the work of Quentin Schultze, a communications expert at Calvin College who argues that technology empowers individuals, with the result that individuals rather than larger units, such a household, become the primary unit of connectivity.

Again, this principle can be demonstrated with a reference to transformations in the media. Before the Internet age, a household might have subscribed to and consumed a single newspaper; if anyone in the household wanted news or information, he or she would turn to the same newspaper. Today, even in households that still subscribe to newspapers, the potential sources of news and information are almost limitless when a computer with an Internet connection is available. One person may read a British newspaper online, while another watches video clips from the previous evening's *Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.

Similarly, while a household previously might have belonged to a religious congregation and completed all religious tasks at that congregation—making friends, joining a youth group, studying Scripture—now each member of a household may maintain a separate and highly individualized spiritual life. One person may read the blog of a well-known pastor, while another participates in a faith-based book club via e-mail with friends around the country, and another searches online for information about other faiths.

Of course individualism has always been a defining characteristic of Americans, but Campbell argues that online technologies "heighten and accentuate" this trend, strengthening individualism in new ways.

For Allen Krauskopf, vice president for Internet services at Faith and Values Media, a New York-based media network, this individualism raises some hard questions about the nature of congregations. "Communities today are being driven by homogeneous affinities, and that runs as a crosscurrent against the way congregations are organized today," he said. "Are we looking at the Internet as a force to strengthen congregations as we understand them today, or are we looking at the Internet as a force that removes the congregation as a middleman and allows people to form communities by affinity?"

And his toughest question: "Are you as a congregation here to help the end consumer, or are you looking toward helping your congregation survive and become relevant in the current age? Those seem to me fundamentally different issues."

John Dale, formerly of Trinity Church in Boston, said he worries that online affinity-based religious groups will be too homogeneous. "A congregation is not just a select group of people with similar interests. It's the body of Christ," said Dale. His comments echoed the concerns of Missy Daniel, an editor at Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, who used the news media as an analogy and asked if there is such a thing as too much personal control. "What bothers me is the idea that you can customize your life like you customize your news," she said. "Now you can tailor your news so that you don't get news about foreign affairs, or Catholics or Jews. You can just get news about your own tribe, your own interests."

Campbell agreed that online communities "encourage specialized and selective relations that are homogeneous. That can be problematic for a church that is trying to be embracing to all and not just meet the needs of its members but have a more global, integrated vision." These are questions that cell churches and churches with small groups also wrestle with, said Campbell. "They wonder, 'Should we bring together just twentysomethings? Or should we make it intergenerational?'"

"I don't think there is one set answer to those questions," she said. Each congregation has to decide on priorities for itself. Some congregations, for example, might have a tradition of being intergenerational or multiethnic. Another may be more focused on a particular population. Different decisions may lead naturally to different technologies, said Campbell. "One problem I see is that so often congregations start talking about technology before they define their own mission," she said. "Often there's a sense of,

'We need to be online, let's use this tool,' without learning much about it." In fact, said Campbell, different online tools lead to different results. Said blogger Helen Mildenhall, "homogeneity is not the inevitable result of using online technologies. There is a tool for any sort of goal you are trying to achieve."

JustLife.tv

In 2007 Jeff Kivett, a Christian professional in his thirties, fell into a conversation with a neighbor that veered toward the religious. Jeff was anxious to share his beliefs, but wanted to tread carefully: the neighbor was not a member of Kivett's church, and he was also someone who existed completely outside the world of religious congregations. Kivett tried to answer the neighbor's questions about Christianity as best he could, but at some point "he got stuck," said David Ambrose, pastor of formation at Bridgeway Community Church in Fishers, Indiana.

Kivett belongs to Ambrose's church and also happens to run a new-media-focused marketing firm called Media Fuel. Kivett approached Ambrose with an idea over a cup of coffee: What if Kivett's firm and Ambrose's congregation teamed up to create a video-driven website where average folks could learn how Christian faith has transformed people's lives? The result was JustLife.tv, a website set to launch in late 2008, that features video testimonials about addiction, sexual abuse, and other personal crises. The project, which received some funding from the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, also includes a blog, weekly podcasts, and opportunities for viewers to share their own thoughts and stories.

"It's meant to encourage spiritual conversations—not just to get people to a website, but to get people interacting about Jesus and their faith and the relationships they have with others," explained Ambrose as he demonstrated the website at the April gathering. Ambrose showed a video of a woman, a house painter by profession, who spoke forthrightly, though with some tears, about how her stepfather molested her as a teen and how angry she felt at him and at her mother, who failed to protect her. After turning to her Christian faith for guidance, she said she was able to forgive both of her parents, and though she said she still deals with the side effects of molestation, which affect her capacity for intimacy with her husband, she said she finally feels free of the event that haunted her for so long.

The topics for the videos are "cutting-edge stuff, reaching people where they are living at," Ambrose said. "People can't get honest answers to their questions from a church or anywhere." Other video titles include "Marriage Ain't What I Thought It Would Be" and "Why Do I Always Feel So Pissed Off?" The videos, while professionally produced and edited, have a gritty, real-life feel; the people speaking are not actors or professional speakers, and they wear little if any makeup for the camera. The woman who spoke about being molested, for example, said she had never told her story before to anyone.

Ambrose and Kivett believe "having real people tell real stories" is a vital way to reach people who live far afield from any congregational life, including people like Kivett's neighbor. "Let's say you had a conversation with someone in your life about anger or forgiveness or abuse. You could send them a link to one of the videos and say, 'Check this out, I think you might relate to this.' Then you can follow up with that person and build a relationship and ultimately share your faith. The site is really a way to facilitate conversations," explained Ambrose.

The Power of Anonymity. For some, the idea that people are more open with their personal experiences and opinions online, where they can choose to be anonymous, is disconcerting. Some people don't even like the thought of people posting videos that

reveal their darkest secrets or blogs that chronicle the everyday ups and downs of their emotional life; it strikes some as a tawdry parade of inner life. Of course almost everyone has had the experience of spontaneously opening up to a stranger and discussing details that you might otherwise keep hidden even from close friends and family. The difference with Internet, of course, is that these private, fleeting conversations can now become public, permanent dialogues. New media outlets like YouTube or social networking sites thrive on people's interest in telling their stories to others.

JustLife.tv makes the most of this trend. The videos themselves are so arresting because their subjects are telling the camera stories that most of us don't hear in day-to-day life—or in congregational life. Jan Edmiston, Presbyterian pastor from Alexandria, Virginia, said that online honesty can seem like a refreshing change from more straight-laced congregational life. "People who gathered in the mainline churches over the last century often did so because it was the respectable thing to do. You dressed up and went just to be there, not because you needed something," she said. "Today we still perpetuate that culture of 'everything is fine.' So I'm not about to turn to the person next to me in the pew and say, 'My husband committed suicide yesterday.' That's just not done."

In her research among online Christian communities, Campbell also found that e-mail interactions allowed for and encouraged an exceptional level of honesty. For some, this had to do with the level of anonymity. One member told Campbell: "I think that every church should have a chat room, where people can hide themselves and ask a question about Bible stuff and don't have to be embarrassed." Other members said that anonymity became its own form of intimacy, because outward characteristics—clothes, disabilities, weight, and so forth—did not enter the picture.

"In this 'congregation' we can't hide much," wrote one member of the Community of Prophecy. "We don't stay isolated in our own burdens and struggles. We get stripped of our masks—they don't work well by e-mail. . . . Can any [other congregation] live this out more than an e-mail 'congregation' where we know nothing about each other [besides] the common bond of Christ—the bond of LOVE?"

For others, the intimacy found online stood in contrast to the more buttoned-down atmosphere in offline congregations. "I have to say that I do not find a lot of honesty and trust in my present in-the-flesh congregation," wrote one member of the Anglican Communion Online. "I guess some of my online searching for community goes toward compensating for this lack."

Yet even as people seek out forums where they can choose to be anonymous, or at least where "naked conversation" is the norm, many online participants also expressed a desire to weave that honesty back into congregational life. As another member of the Anglican Communion Online wrote to Campbell, "I've found here a safe place where I can ask questions and share some longings that I've never been able to before. . . . I hope I'll eventually feel freer to discuss them face-to-face with other people, especially people at my own church."

For Ambrose, projects like JustLife.tv can also help bring such honesty to the congregation level. "We have found a certain anonymity helps deepen relationships. Sometimes it's easier when that happens first online, when you're behind a keyboard; it doesn't necessarily happen when you're sitting next to a person in a pew."

To Brian Brunius, who was drawn into his local Catholic parish through Facebook, the physical distance created by interacting online is a comfortable one for getting to know

the relative strangers who also attend his parish; when his parish priest friended him on Facebook, for example, Brunius spent a while looking through the pastor's friends and identifying other people he knew only by face from the congregation. "Often it's only my fear of intimacy or opening up that prevents me from making connections. But if someone else mediates that for me, or if they can step in and help make that introduction in the virtual world, it makes the real-world experience that much easier."

Regular users of Web 2.0 technologies commonly experience that distinctions between online relationships and offline relationships constantly shift, intersect, and overlap, rendering the distinction almost meaningless at times. "Like it or not, there are people who know me better through Facebook than people who see me everyday," said Greg Atkinson, who also serves as director of technical arts at a church in Dallas, Texas. "I work with some people, and we say, 'How are you doing?' but they don't know what's going on with me, the way someone does who follows me on Twitter. Just being face-to-face doesn't make it real. You're only as authentic as you want to be, whether that's online or offline."

Parents, Shut-Ins, and Twentysomethings

Mark Brown, the New Zealand-based pastor who leads the Anglican church in Second Life, discovered via informal online research that 17 percent of those who attended the Anglican Church in Second Life attended no other church service offline. One respondent to Brown's survey shared, "I have been housebound for the last two years due to disability so, at present, this is the only church service I attend." Brown wrote in his report on the survey that the comment "highlights well the aim of the virtual Anglican Cathedral which is 'to be church for people wherever they are, whatever their circumstance.'"

Not only housebound people are constrained in time and space: Many categories of people say they would and do benefit from religious offerings that can be adapted more readily to their schedules and locations.

"The fact that a congregation wants or expects me to get into the car at certain time to educate my children or go to Torah study group is counter culture in some way. I'm used to returning e-mails at midnight," said Lisa Colton, founder and president of Darim Online. To be successful congregations should not do away altogether with real-world events, she said, but congregations should provide opportunities for members to participate in a more fluid way. "If I can't get to synagogue on a Friday night, I can still have Shabbat dinner at my house, download the rabbi's sermon, and listen to it on my way to work on Monday. That's still valuable. Congregations need to speak to people on their own terms and engage people in way that works for them."

Helen Mildenhall recalled what it was like to participate in a congregation when she was the mother of small children. "The service itself was not social; it was about sitting and listening to a bunch of stuff. And as soon as the service was over, when everyone started talking and drinking coffee, my kids grabbed me away," she said. What Mildenhall discovered, however, was that she could communicate easily online with people who shared her religious identity and interests. Mildenhall found that when she had a chance to meet offline some of the people she met online, much of the important work of getting to know the other person was already done. "When we got together, we already knew things about each other, like, 'How many kids do you have?' We had already gone through that all online."

The point for Mildenhall is that many people are in the situation she found herself in. "I still wanted to meet people; I wanted to meet people in person whether I met them first

on the Internet or not," she said. "But what the Internet can do is make it convenient to get together at a time when nothing in your life is convenient."

Helen Thompson Mosher faced a challenge in her teenage years that involved not time but geographic constraints. "When I was fifteen years old, my parents changed churches, and I lost all my friends," she recalled. "Shortly thereafter, I stopped going to church—for about fifteen years." Mosher imagined what could have happened had the online tools that exist today been available to her then. "I might have been able to continue to interact with those friends and stay connected to my church community, and I might not have vanished off on this fifteen-year detour." Mosher has since reconnected with her childhood church, reading its newsletter online. "I've realized this is the church of my heart in many, many ways."

Wayne Floyd, education program manager at the Alban Institute, added that college students are much like Mosher: After four years their social worlds dissolve. "The virtual world gives them a way to sustain their friendships even after that physical community has changed."

What some religious leaders discover is that what works well for special categories like harried parents, disconnected teens, or disabled shut-ins also works well for pretty much anyone. Ann Fontaine, an Episcopal minister and blogger in Wyoming, wrote about a recent experience the Diocese of Wyoming. The diocese used Blackboard, an online utility often used by teachers, to offer a well-known distance-education program, known as Education for Ministry. "Originally we thought it would be great for rural isolated students," wrote Fontaine in a June 2008 article for the website *The Daily Episcopalian*. "We have discovered that it is great for those who travel for work, those who live in cities and don't want one more night out, those who have children at home and snowbirds. The intimacy and depth of sharing is beyond my dreams. When we do find time to see each other in person—we are like old friends."

Campbell said that what many people are looking for is a Cheers experience—a chance to walk into a place where, as the song to the former TV sitcom said, "Everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came." And with the new abilities of the Internet, people are bringing new expectations of always-on, raw connectivity to the age-old desire for community. Said Campbell: "People are looking for relationships. They're looking for places where they can care about people and feel cared for. They want to know that if they don't show up in the chat room, people will actually check up on them. They want a sense of connection, and not just on a Sunday. They want a twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week connection to other people. They want an intimate community where they can be transparent with others and others can be transparent with them."

The next section of this resource describes how others have plunged in to the waters of Web 2.0.

Technology in Action

Editor's Overview: In this section, Andrea offers practical advice for congregations as they navigate the digital road ahead.

After narrating the story of a blogging senior Episcopal rector who has discovered that "technology is expanding my ministry as fast as I can learn it," this section suggests key questions for congregations to consider as they approach the world of Web 2.0—questions ranging from "How has our congregation already been changed by digital technology?" to "What new groups of people in particular would we like to reach?"

Andrea explains the quick and easy Web 2.0 tools with which to begin networking and responds to the concerns and fears that some people experience when faced with the vast array of Web 2.0 options.

New forms of ministry—such as bringing technology-savvy young people together with technology-phobic older people—are explored here as well.

Andrea concludes that "newness always brings some pain along with possibility, but the true rewards will come to those who are willing to dive in, no matter how cold the water seems from the shore."

On the Blessings of Diving In: Lessons from a Blogging Pastor

Rick Lord, rector of the Church of the Holy Comforter in Vienna, Virginia, first got the idea to start a blog around the same time as his twin brother, also an Episcopal priest. ("That's typical for twins," he noted.) Lord said he had been "fascinated with the possibility of going public with some of the things I think about." When he saw a few other pastors starting blogs, Lord was encouraged to set up his own, called *World of Your Making*, in 2004. "Both my brother and I found it to be a wonderful extension of our teaching ministries," he said.

The process has not always been easy or intuitive for him. "When I first started, I didn't know what I was doing," Lord said. "But I think there's blessing to just jumping in and trying it." Whatever his initial reservations, they were quickly outweighed by the pleasure of communicating in a new way. "For me, it was a way to explore some of my own questions and interests, particularly in the area of leadership and congregational development," he said. "It met my personal need for doing some online thinking and connecting people in my congregation with the resources I'm looking at."

What he finds exciting is not just giving his parishioners a peek into his thoughts, but also communicating with faith and technology leaders beyond his own church. In the years since he founded the blog, he said, a huge number of other religious leaders have started their own blogs, making for an exciting sense of community. Lord has connected with other bloggers—arranging to meet one in a pub while visiting England, for example—and Helen Thompson Mosher mentioned that she attended Lord's church at one point "just because you blog." Said Lord, "On Sunday morning when someone comes up to me and says, 'I read your blog,' that makes it all worthwhile."

Lord's success with his blog prompted another experience he had last year while teaching a course on cultural and religious diversity developed by the Church of England. After the first presentation for the class, a couple of parishioners came up and asked if they could borrow my notes and also look at the list of books I was drawing on for the course," said Lord. At first he planned to photocopy his notes and book list to hand out to the class members. Then he got an idea. He set up a new blog, again using an easy

blog template from TypePad, where he published the notes for each of his presentations along with the list of books and his comments on each. The blog "enhanced the course immeasurably," said Lord. "People had direct access to the materials they were reading. They left comments and read other people's comments."

In many ways, said Lord, Web 2.0 technologies expand circles of connection for him and his congregation. He mentioned younger staff members at his church "who know this stuff like the back of their hand and bring us into networks I would never have been part of." Sunday morning may not bring all those circles together, he noted. "But these wider circles of connection are enriching, even though we do not physically see each other maybe more than once or twice a year."

"Technology is expanding my ministry as fast as I can learn it. Sometimes I feel like I'm experiencing paradigm-shift whiplash, because it's all happening so fast, and I'm just trying to keep up. I am finding it's an extraordinary and exciting time," he said. "I share some of the concerns about the darker side of technology, but my feeling is people do want to make physical connections as well as online ones, and this technology can help facilitate that connection."

David Chandler, the online managing editor of the American Baptist Church, said Lord's experience is a model for other religious leaders. "He had that sense of experimentation, where he took that initial step and then found personal satisfaction as well as new kinds of pastor care," he said. "That's a step of faith, and maybe it's something we all have to take."

Defining Your Mission, Expanding Your Vision

Congregations, said Heidi Campbell, need to "wake up and realize that technology is now embedded in our everyday lives. People are going to be using it whether or not that's facilitated at the top or at the grassroots level." In other words, whether or not you take action, action is already happening, and the question is how you will participate in it.

At the same time, however, Campbell cautioned that the new tools of technology, no matter how interesting, should not direct congregational decisions about adapting to the digital age. This advice might seem paradoxical: If the new Web 2.0 tools prompt the conversation in the first place, then shouldn't the decision-making process focus on sorting through those new tools in a very practical way? Yet Campbell, along with Mosher and Colton (who both consult for congregations on these issues), are clear that having a sense of mission must come first. You have to decide what you want to get done before you can decide which tool you want to use.

To get the conversation going, congregational leaders might begin by asking themselves some questions. Simple ones to start with include these:

- How has our congregation already been changed by digital technology?
- What are the positives and the negatives of those changes?
- What new technology tools has the congregation started using recently, and how did that process of adaptation go?
- Is anyone responsible, formally or informally, for online technology in our congregation?

- Have new technologies resulted in "winners and losers" within or outside our community?
- What new groups of people in particular would we like to reach?
- Do we have an already strong program we could further strengthen with online tools?
- Do we have an area of weakness that other online tools might help us shore up?

The answers to these questions will of course point congregations in different directions. And here is where the learning takes place. Because at a certain point, your church's mission can no longer be fully imagined without knowledge of Web 2.0 tools. Just as Facebook or MySpace might allow teenagers or college students to keep in touch with friends and leaders at their home church or college ministry, so JustLife.tv might make it easier for an evangelical Christian to reach his neighbor and for a pastor to share his or her thoughts and experiences with his or her congregation in new ways.

Different tools do different jobs, and therefore the question becomes, "Which job do you want to get done?" Because some of the new tools are so powerful—a digital camera, a USB cable, and a YouTube account can make your sermon available to thousands of other people—you must become at least somewhat familiar with these tools before you are able to imagine the possibilities of how you might use them in your congregation.

So here's how it might work in a world halfway between the ideal and the real: The profusion and popularity of Web 2.0 tools prompt a conversation in your congregation. A group of interested congregants and leaders sit down—either in person or virtually—to have a probing talk about the congregation's mission; this will probably mean more than simply reading the ten-year-old mission statement.

Having sojourned back into the spiritual wellsprings of the congregation and defined new priorities, the group is now ready to engage with the technology questions. Gathering information from a number of sources—each other, online reviews, fellow congregants, and sister congregations—leads naturally to a decision-making process in which mission drives technology and technology expands mission.

Obviously, a real-world process would be a lot messier than this neat recipe. But the essential ingredients are a desire to learn and grow technologically, combined with the time and effort of a group conversation on the topic.

Congregations might benefit from creating a "technographic profile" of members—both those who already belong to or participate in the congregation and those who you hope to bring in. This term, developed by two new-media experts and bloggers at the consulting firm Forrester Research, means to get a look at how people in your congregation (or targeted future congregation) are already using media online. How many people in your congregation blog either personally or professionally? What percent have ever uploaded content like photos or videos online? How many read or comment on blogs or add customer reviews to books and other products? Are there people in your congregation who do not have broadband access or who are in some way limited from going online? Are they using Web 2.0 tools without realizing it?

Professional vendors like Forrester Research conduct these profiles for business clients (at a business price), but congregations might be able to collect this information in more informal and less costly ways. You could even just stand in front of the congregation and ask for a show of hands in response to questions.

The important thing to look for, said Larry Golemon of the Alban Institute, is the "synergy between online and offline." How are congregants already using Web 2.0 mediums to connect with one another? "The goal for most congregations, ultimately, is how do we broaden people's worlds? It's not just about joining or creating social networks or affinity groups. It's about deepening our sense of self in the world," he said. And each congregation will have its own definition for what that broadening looks like. The point is not to use the tools for the sake of using them, but using them to accomplish the fundamental mission of your congregation.

Moving One Step at a Time: Web 1.5

When it comes to the buzz around Web 2.0 tools, the line from Bob Dylan's song, "The Times They Are A Changin'," comes to mind: "You better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone." There's a sense of urgency. And yet, while urgency can be good, rushing is bad. One way to think about proceeding slowly is to build on what you already have.

Anne Van Dusen, the late senior research associate of the Congregational Resource Guide, conceived of this as Web 1.5. "Congregations shouldn't lose site of their Web 1.0 assets, such as the all-important 'front door' of your congregation: the website," she said. "Many congregations already have online newsletters or digital church management systems. Think of Web 2.0 tools as additional tools for communication."

Van Dusen suggested that congregations not only draw confidence from past successes in mastering once-foreign technologies but also begin modestly. A simple first step would be identifying a couple of blogs that are relevant to congregation members and providing links in the online newsletter, along with a quick introduction explaining what a blog is, and why you thought this one would be interesting.

Introducing the topic of blogs in the congregation may bring resident bloggers out of the woodwork. Does your congregation currently have members who blog either professional or personally? If so, consider linking to their blogs or maybe asking them to write something for a newsletter that they can also cross-post at their own blog.

Lord reported that for him getting involved with Web 2.0 technology required "a very steep learning curve." Setting up a Facebook profile, he said, "was a major threshold for me. But once I got there, I was astonished by the number of people who friended me," he said. "I had to figure out what that meant. But once I got the basics, I was amazed at the ways in which networking was already happening in my own congregation."

Easy Tools, Free Tools

As you dip your toes in the water, you may find your congregants swimming up from beneath you, already in the water and excited to see you getting wet as well. A well-worn adage in the business world is that successful companies "fail often, fail fast, and fail cheap." This is the same advice management guru Clayton Christensen offers to struggling newspaper companies: Figure out quick and easy ways to try the new technologies.

It applies to congregations as well. It takes about five minutes to set up a basic social networking profile on a site like Facebook, for example. You can search the network for other members of your religious or personal life. If you discover that few others are on that network, then maybe it's not the right channel of communication. Try to figure out, then, what online or online-offline channels your congregants are currently using.

Another zero-cost investment is setting up a page on a photo-sharing website like Flickr or Photobucket. When a congregational event takes place—a picnic or youth retreat—ask people who are taking pictures there to upload some photos to that site, "tagging" those photos with a key phrase. Tags are simply a word or phrase attached to a piece of online content—whether a blog posting or photo or video—that make it easy for people to search and find that content. So if your congregation is called "The Hindu Temple of Greater Wichita," you might ask temple members to tag content with the phrase "wichita hindus" or "HTGW."

If a tag is well explained and congregational members start to upload content along with the tag, "a significant body of work develops that is associated with your congregation," said Lisa Colton of Darim Online. "If a fourteen-year-old girl goes camping on a youth trip and uploads her photos to Flickr, and I upload pictures with the same tag of my kids in the synagogue preschool, then after a while, you easily get three hundred or four hundred photos," she said. "These photos are taken from the perspective of the community—not from the perspective of someone who is trying to market the community. That's a good way to distribute power and responsibility in a congregation."

The other advantage, from a marketing point of view, is that a body of work assembled by a group of people capturing their personal experience of congregational life can feel more authentic and realistic than a brochure or even website developed by congregational administrators. "When you go to Amazon to find a book, do you read the publisher's synopsis? Maybe, but you probably pay more attention to the customer reviews and the number of stars the book averages," she said. "You don't know those reviewers, and yet you're more likely to buy a book that has five stars than a book that has two stars. People tend to trust their peers."

Similarly, a collection of photos uploaded by congregational members can give you a quick sense of what congregational life is really like. "If you see that 95 percent of the women are covering their heads or that the kippas are all black," then you know it's a fairly orthodox congregation, no matter what the website may say, said Colton.

Participants at the April gathering pointed out that posting photos in public, with or without caption information, raises potentially serious privacy issues. Is it okay for people to publish photos of other people online without their permission? Some people would be uncomfortable with the idea of having photos of children online, for example. Susan Elliott, the former communications director at St. Columba's Church in Washington, D.C., said the policy of the Episcopal Church is that while including captioned photos of minors in print newsletters is okay, those captions must be removed if the photos are included online. "Congregations might need to review their insurance policies as well," said Missy Daniel of *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*.

Another option for a religious leader who enjoys writing is blogging. Helen Mildenhall reminded participants in April that people like personal stories. If you as a congregational leader feel ready to share your story, or just what you think and experience day-to-day, then blogging might be the right outlet, as it has been for Rick Lord.

Mildenhall referred to Pastor Tommy Nelson, a well-known Baptist leader and senior pastor of Denton Bible Church in Texas, who preached one morning, in a very straightforward way, about his own experience with depression. Nelson soon learned that sales of recordings of that sermon skyrocketed. "It came back down when I started talking about Paul again," he joked to an audience of students at Dallas Theological Seminary some months later. Mildenhall noted that Nelson's discussion of the issue was

largely free of theology; it was his personal struggle that people seemed to connect with.

Campbell's research and the work of other scholars of the digital world confirm that online interaction very often revolves around stories and personal narratives. And as Brian Bailey, Web director of the Fellowship Church in Dallas and author of the book *The Blogging Church*, has written, blogging is primarily about telling your story, and the story of your church, to others.

Measuring Success

So how do you know if your experiments are failing or succeeding? One of the beauties of online technologies is that they offer precise, immediate data on how people are interacting with your content. Unlike, say, a mass mailing of postcards inviting people to a church service, where you can collect only anecdotal data about who read and responded to the invitation, the Web offers an endless array of metrics.

If you send e-mails through providers like Constant Contact, for example, you can find out the "click-through rates"—that is, how many people actually opened the e-mail (and, presumably, read it). You can see how many fans or friends your congregation has on a social networking site; you can see how many times a sermon has been downloaded or a video has been watched. These statistics can result in some surprising findings. "If you send out a newsletter through the e-mail account of the synagogue secretary, whom no one really knows, you'll get a much lower click-through rate than if you send it out under the rabbi's name," said Colton.

The only problem with Web stats, as these metrics are sometimes called, is that few congregations make effective use of them. In Darim Online's knowledge-sharing network, which brings together more than one hundred Jewish synagogues and organizations, only three of eighty-five congregations surveyed were actually making use of their Web stats, said Colton. "If someone in the congregation is spending two hours a week typing the rabbi's sermon into a PDF document, and only four people look at it, is that a good use of your time? Maybe those two hours would be better spent writing a short blog post and responding to comments on it; that might go further making the rabbi's teachings more accessible to the congregation," she said.

Statistics can help motivate staff and volunteers—for example, learning that a particular feature or bit of content was well trafficked—and it can be important information to present to vestries or boards, who want to see verifiable results from online initiatives. Statistics are also relevant for congregations themselves. "If you find that 75 percent of your congregation is visiting your website weekly, you can announce that during a service: In other words, if you're not visiting the website, you're missing something."

But measurement need not be confined to online charts and graphs. To Lord, online engagement suggests new ways of evaluating success. "You begin to ask yourself: What is success in a church? Is it truly the number of people who attend a service on a Sunday morning? Or is it the web of relationships and networks that your community represents at any given moment?"

For those who are new to the Web 2.0 world, talk of metrics and click-throughs and tagging can seem overwhelming, but Brian Brunius found simpler terms. "There is a lot we can be doing that we're not doing," he said. "Many times it just involves redefining the way we think about what we do. Instead of doing things the same old way, you can find a new way to do it that ultimately takes the same or even less amount of time and

money. A lot of what this all comes down to is finding ways to make the most with the least."

Fear of Comments

One of the biggest fears people unfamiliar, or only somewhat familiar, with Web 2.0 tools share is this: the fear that a random commenter will enter a site and fill it up with obscenity, solicitations, or worse. "One of the first things that always comes up in discussions with churches is, 'I'm scared some crazy guy will come in and start posting offensive material all over my website,'" said Helen Thompson Mosher. While larger organizations often do deal with this, Mosher has found that in smaller online community, for example at RevGalBlogPals, a site where Mosher and other Christian women blog, that phenomenon rarely takes place.

"In faith communities, in my experience, there is generally not that level of harassment that some people are afraid of," said Mosher. Heidi Campbell backed up Mosher's observation. "In my own research, and in research from others who study online religious communities, deception seems to be much lower in faith groups [than in other online venues]. The idea is that if you're going online to join a faith-based community, you're functioning by a different set of rules," she said. "Theology and worldview plays an important role in defining the expectations of community behavior online."

To Colton, at Darim Online, unwanted comments can be managed with a set of good policies. "I like the policy set by Robert Scoble's 'living room policy,'" which he explained in his book with Shel Israel, *Naked Conversations*. The idea is that my blog or website is like my living room. If I invite you into my living room to talk, it would be fine to disagree and have some banter and thoughtful conversation," Colton said. "But if you step over the line and don't interact respectfully, then I can ask you to leave. After all, it's my living room. So bloggers have authority to delete those comments." Indeed, requiring commenters to register, use their full names, and abide by a code of conduct is becoming common for blogs and websites.

At the same time, however, Colton said congregational leaders might need to open up a little more to the idea of online criticism. "Not everyone's going to be on the same page in your congregation," she said. If someone, say, writes in with criticism on a rabbi's blog, that comment might be difficult to read, but it might also provide an opportunity. "Open conversations allow you to develop relationships," she said. "Maybe the rabbi can write back to that person, engaging them more deeply. We need to decrease the fear we have of someone disagreeing with us."

The take-away point, said Greg Atkinson, is that religious leaders should not allow their fears to drive them away from experimenting with Web 2.0 technologies. "Yes, there is all kinds of junk on the Internet. That doesn't mean it can't be used for positive, valid reasons," he said.

Leveraging Resources for Web 2.0

As the Alban Institute's Wayne Floyd said, the world of Web 2.0 technologies is exciting—and it also represents a potentially enormous timesink. For pastors and congregational leaders who may already feel stretched thin, the imperative to now master a new set of complex and rapidly evolving technologies can feel oppressive. In an "always on" digital world, where instant communication is the norm, how can a leader cope? Pastor David Ambrose put it this way: "I'm in my church lobby on a Sunday morning after services and sometimes I feel overwhelmed because I'm supposed to know a little bit about everybody there. And now I've just added this entire online

component, which includes people that I ministered to eighteen years ago who I'm still supposed to know and think about. Being involved in these online networks at times can feel completely overwhelming. My first reaction to Facebook was, 'I can't keep up with this.'"

But Ambrose himself has found ways of coping. When he was puzzling over which technologies his congregation should start using, he said, "I really just prayed to God to lead me to the people he wants me to connect with. And he brought Jeff right into my life." Jeff Kivett, of course, was the owner of the media company who proposed a partnership to create the JustLife.tv site. Ambrose reflected, "What is my job as a pastor? To equip the saints to do the work, as it says in Ephesians 4, and not to do all the work myself."

For the despairing congregational leader, then, help may most easily come in the form of willing congregants. And Web 2.0 technologies, which are often built by amateur, individual users, lend themselves naturally to an everyone-pitching-in model. The fact is, a number of congregants probably have a lot more experience, either personally or professionally, with some of the online tools that might work best for your congregation. This fact can become a negative or a positive. Mosher pointed out that if a congregation doesn't set up a Facebook group, someone else will probably do it on his or her own. While someone taking such an initiative is great, it's a potential negative if the effort is unsupported by the congregational leadership and may duplicate or even muddle other communication efforts.

The positive approach is to actively engage congregational members who are proficient at new technologies. This can be a new form of ministry. "If a college kid in your parish can set up a Facebook group, then that's their version of hosting coffee hour," said Mosher. "It's good for church staff members to engage people like that and recognize their knowledge as a ministry and say, 'We can collaborate on this.'"

Another low-cost, low-risk way to bone up on and then keep up with online technologies is to share information and experiences with fellow congregations. One of Darim Online's popular offerings for Jewish organizations is its Learning Network, where congregational leaders and interested volunteers participate in discussion boards and webinars, all with the aim of sharing knowledge and experiences about Web 2.0 tools. (The network was originally open only to Darim Online clients; now it is open to other congregations for a yearly fee of about three hundred dollars.)

Ecunet is also based around the idea of a learning community, albeit without an explicit focus on Web 2.0 technologies (though a conversation on that issue could instantly be created). Because it has long been a forum for pastors and other congregational leaders to share experiences and insights, Ecunet offers a natural meeting point for people to swap stories and support one another in the quest to bring a congregation online. If you are choosing a vendor that designs websites or online services, ask if its services also offer this kind of opportunity for peer-to-peer learning.

Developing a network of knowledgeable people who are also working or experimenting with Web 2.0 tools—whether these people are congregational members, your teenage children, or a more formal network of fellow leaders—can go a long way to solving the problem of how to keep up with the breakneck pace of change online. "Church leaders that are wondering which technologies to use are ones who go online to do something rather than live online," said Floyd of the Alban Institute. "If you live online, then you adapt naturally to changes." In other words, if you're swimming in the river, you'll move with the current. And while not every congregational leader may be ready to fully

immerse themselves in the stream of Web 2.0, every leader has the capacity to know someone who does.

Bridging Technology Divides

Going online and living online are ways of describing how different people relate to the online world. Wayne Floyd suggested, as many others have, that going online to accomplish certain tasks—checking the weather, buying plane tickets, sending a gift—is not the same as expressing your identity, building relationships, and expanding your world through multiple online channels.

"This divide is often a generational one, but not always," said Floyd. Like the distinction between digital immigrants and digital natives, the distinctions are not always clear, but the fact remains: Nearly every congregation contains a mix of people, ranging from those who suffer e-mail as a necessary evil and those who delight in narrating their life via Twitter. Not everyone is online and not everyone online is online in the same way, and this equation changes and mutates everyday. What does leadership look like in that situation?

David Chandler, online managing editor of the American Baptist Church, said that the generational gap, or the gap between those who rely heavily on online technology and those who don't, means that congregations find themselves today in a transition time.

"There is gap of twenty-five years until the fifteen-year-olds become church elders," he said. Chandler shared the story of attending a men's breakfast at a church, where all the men were sixty or older. "I'm thinking, how can we get these seventy-year-old guys to use the Web in some way? It's not going to be without a lot of help." He also recounted the experience of seeing a friend's teenage son create an amazingly sophisticated animated movie using the iMovie editing program on his Macintosh laptop. "We have all this social media bubbling up, but nobody in the congregations are at the wheel to connect the dots and say, 'Let's use this technology.' So the youth are bypassing the church and living online to a large extent, while old people aren't coming to the party. So what are we going to do for the next twenty years?"

Having defined this dilemma, Chandler proposes an obvious way to bridge the gap: Why not bring together the technology-savvy young people and technology-phobic older people as a form of ministry? Chandler imagined having young people like his friend's son interacting with the older men at the breakfast, "capturing some of their tremendous wisdom" with a video camera, and then "letting these younger guys loose with iMovie." The question, he said, is "how to translate the wisdom of a wiser, spiritually mature person to a younger audience, in a Twitter-like environment."

To Brian Brunius, that question shows the rich possibilities for learning and growth such a project might present. "In every congregation, there are young people who are very tech savvy, who are really good at translating ideas for people their own age to consume. That's their area of expertise." And congregational leaders should draw on this expertise, he said. "No pastor, no minister, has time to embrace all these new technologies, because that's the cost: time. Most of these technologies are free of financial costs, but they do incur time costs. So if you can enlist people who are already users of the technology, who know better than you ever will how to use it, how to translate thirty minutes of some old man talking into 140 characters they Twitter out to their friends, then why not do it?"

In Rick Lord's view, online technology is a place for exercising leadership. "Part of my responsibility as a pastor is to model moving across that [technology] threshold for my

generation and the older generation." At the same time, even making an attempt to master social media can have an important impact on those who already participate in it, he said. "People can say, 'Well, gosh, if Rick can learn how to use Facebook, then maybe there is hope for this congregation. I just might be able to relate to this guy because he knows the language that I speak, and he knows how to use the technology that I use.'"

In the eyes of Helen Mildenhall, the vision should be about "giving people a platform to do what they want to do and are already doing and will do elsewhere if you don't give them the opportunity." Without making that leap, she asked, "Will there be a church when the fifty-year-olds are gone?"

The challenges, then, range from the very practical and age-old ones—how to engage young people; how to bridge generational divides—to very new ones that involve questioning the very definitions of congregational life. "I think the real blade we walk is the divide between an old way of thinking and the reality of the new world," said Brunius. "It's the idea that congregational life doesn't always have to revolve around going to church on a Sunday morning, that congregation is bigger than one service or one sermon, that it stretches out over time and space and across continents, possibly."

Newness always brings some pain along with possibility, but the true rewards will come to those who are willing to dive in, no matter how cold the water seems from the shore.



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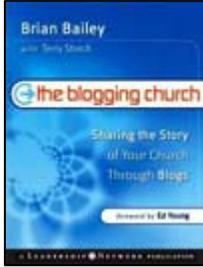
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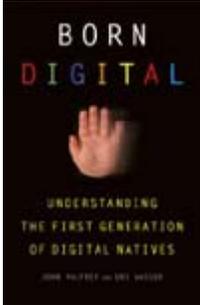
Resources



The Blogging Church: Sharing the Story of Your Church through Blogs (Book)

Brian Bailey, Terry Storch, Authors. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

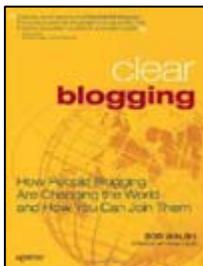
After defining a "blog" and explaining how blogs have become key communication tools, *The Blogging Church* addresses three central questions posed by churches considering a blog: "Why should my church embrace blogging?; What can blogs accomplish? How can we get started?" It also helps congregations avoid building bad blogs and alerts leaders to common problems with blogs. Chapters on such topics as "RSS" and podcasting—as well as comments from such veteran bloggers as Mark Driscoll and Tony Morgan—round out this accessible, informative introduction to the blogging world and its role in congregational life. Here is a must-read for congregations seriously considering blogs.



Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives (Book)

John Palfrey, Urs Gasser, Authors. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008.

John Palfrey and Urs Gasser posit that "Digital Natives" (people born after 1980) have grown up, and now function, in a vastly different world than those born before 1980. Unlike the older "Digital Immigrants," the Natives do not distinguish between their online and offline lives—nor do they separate their digital and non-digital identities. They relate to one another, to information, to music, and to the creative process using approaches that can seem foreign, and even frightening, to the Immigrants. *Born Digital* helps readers better understand the Native generation and discusses the trends that should concern the public as well as the trends that are cause for excitement.



Clear Blogging: How People Blogging Are Changing the World and How You Can Join Them (Book)

Bob Walsh, Author. New York, NY: Springer-Verlag, Inc., 2007.

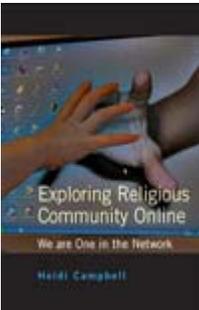
Written in accessible language, this book from software developer Bob Walsh is bedrock reading for two groups of people: those new to blogging (who should read the book through sequentially) and those whose blogging experience has not led to the results they expected (who can pick and choose among the most relevant chapters). It explains what blogging is, why it matters, and how to begin blogging. It then explores the various kinds of blogs—from the personal to the professional. Walsh follows with key advice on using the latest tools, adding podcasts, and attracting and keeping readers. He concludes with some interesting predictions about the future of blogs.



Digital Natives (Project and Web Resource)

www.digitalnative.org

An interdisciplinary collaboration of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University and the Research Center for Information Law at the University of St. Gallen, Digital Natives seeks to "understand and support young people as they grow up in a digital age." Areas of inquiry in the Digital Natives project include Identity, Privacy, and Safety (what will happen as photos, blogs, and videos become a person's permanent online "dossier"?); Creativity, Piracy, and Intellectual Property (what will happen as information and ideas become easily duplicated and transmitted?); and Information Quality and Learning (what will happen in the face of information overload, especially when some information is questionable?).



Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One In The Network (Book)

Heidi Campbell, Author. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005.

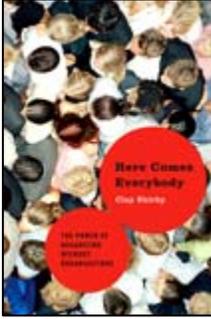
Heidi Campbell, who teaches communication at Texas A&M University, conducted a seven-year study to assess the impact of the Internet on communication habits and relationships within religious communities—both online and offline. This book reports the results of her research. Its aim is to "highlight the characteristics of online community" as well as to "consider what implications this might have for individuals in offline religious communities." Campbell found that the religious community online is a supplement, not a substitute, for offline church and offline relationships. At the same time, religious community online fosters relationship, mutual caring, experiences of being valued, interpersonal connection, intimate communication, and faith sharing.



Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies (Book)

Charlene Li, Josh Bernoff, Author. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2008.

Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, vice presidents and principal researchers at Forrester Research, define *groundswell* as "a spontaneous movement of people using online tools to connect, take charge of their own experience, and get what they need—information, support, ideas, products, and bargaining power—from each other." It includes everything from blogs to podcasts, wikis to YouTube, Facebook to Twitter. The authors help organizations respond to this groundswell by explaining how to develop strategies that will facilitate embracing online tools and using them for collaboration, empowerment, and transformation. Although written for businesses, the strategy-development process, or POST (for People, Objectives, Strategy, and Technology) described here can be adapted by congregations.



Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations (Book)

Clay Shirky, Author. New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2008.

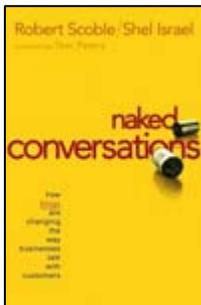
"The centrality of group effort to human life means that anything that changes the way groups function will have profound ramifications for everything from commerce and government to media and religion." With this premise, Clay Shirky has written a book that explains how the latest interactive technologies are revolutionizing group formation and empowering group participants to share information, collaborate with each other, and take collective action. Shirky—a professor at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program—illustrates his points with numerous stories from public life, politics, and business. Religious leaders will find this tour of social technology exhilarating and challenging as they consider its applications to congregations.



The Language of New Media (Book)

Lev Manovich, Author. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

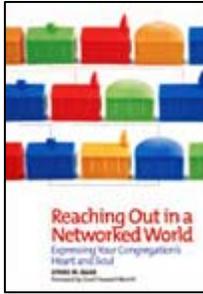
Lev Manovich, Visual Arts Professor at the University of California, has written a theoretical work that connects "digital studies" with film theory, literary theory, computer technology, and studies in information culture. He holds that "just as the printing press in the fourteenth century and photography in the nineteenth century had a revolutionary impact on the development of modern society and culture, today we are in the middle of a new media revolution—the shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication." While there is room for creative optimism in this development, Manovich is not blind to the possibilities of the new media to support totalitarianism.



Naked Conversations: How Blogs Are Changing the Way Businesses Talk with Customers (Book)

Robert Scoble, Shel Israel, Authors. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2006.

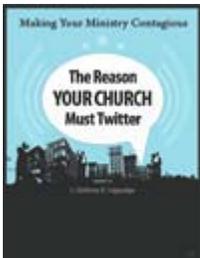
Innovation experts Robert Scoble and Shel Israel discuss the power of blogs to connect people and organizations. They argue that this power stems from blogs being more "publishable, findable, social, viral, syndicable, and linkable" than other communication tools. Examples from numerous industries illustrate the authors' points. One chapter explains what happens when you "do it [blogging] wrong" (by writing inflammatory material, or—sometimes worse—boring people). Another chapter documents what happens when you "do it right" (by keeping blogs simple and focused, or telling a good story). Scoble and Israel conclude that blogging will make listening to people as important as talking to them, thus igniting a new, "Conversational Era."



Reaching Out in a Networked World: Expressing Your Congregation's Heart and Soul (Book)

Lynne M. Baab, Author. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008.

The central issue in this book, according to author Lynne Baab, is "the urgency of considering and evaluating the way new technologies can help congregations convey their identity and values to people within and outside the congregation." *Reaching Out in a Networked World* begins by inviting congregations to consider their values (what they care about) and identity (who they are). It then explores common myths about how values and identity are communicated. What follows are chapters on significant communication tools: websites, blogs, e-mail, listservs, desktop publishing, and projection screens. Book appendices explain how to do a "communication audit" for a congregation and how to establish or revamp a website.

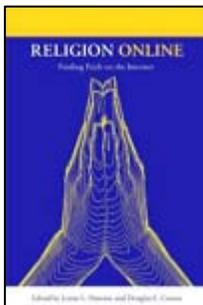


The Reason Your Church Must Twitter: Making Your Ministry Contagious (E-book and Web Resource)

Anthony D. Coppedge, Author. Bedford, TX: Anthony Coppedge, 2009.

<http://twitterforchurches.com/>

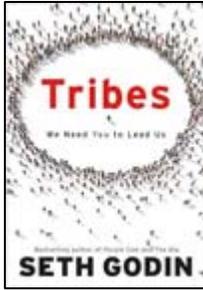
You've heard of Twitter as a communication tool, but you don't know what it is or how to use it. This e-book from Anthony Coppedge explains the ways Twitter can help you reach your congregation—or specific ministry teams—with new information, prayers and concerns, and other messages. Coppedge discusses how to use Twitter for announcements, conversations, and communication with staff and volunteers. He spells out how to set up a Twitter account, how to "tweet," and "how to follow and be followed." He even describes the latest devices for optimizing your use of Twitter. A word about implementing a congregational "Twitter strategy" concludes this short but information-filled download.



Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet (Book)

Lorne L. Dawson, Douglas E. Cowan, Editors. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004.

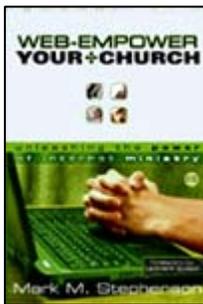
This essay collection from sociologists and religion scholars explores the ways that the Internet has affected religious understanding and practice. The editors draw a distinction between *religion online* (which provides information about religious services and traditions) and *online religion* (which provides opportunities to observe religious practices). They raise questions about the use of the Internet for religious purposes, the relationships between online and offline religious activities, and which styles of religion are best served by the Internet. Essays address how people are being religious in cyberspace, how mainline religions are functioning online, how the Internet supports new religious movements, and how the Internet serves as a tool of conversion.



Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us (Book)

Seth Godin, Author. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008.

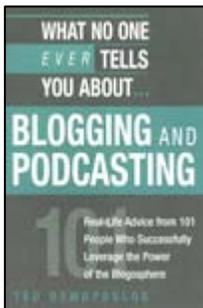
"A tribe," says business leader and author Seth Godin, "is a group of people connected to one another, connected to a leader, and connected to an idea." While yesterday's tribes were limited by geography, today's tribes face no such limits, thanks to Internet technology and instant communication. But Godin emphasizes that technology alone won't guarantee the leadership a tribe needs. What does guarantee such leadership is the faith, courage, and passion of those who truly seek to make a difference. This slender volume offers inspiration and ideas on how to understand leadership, how to lead others, and how to help others grow as leaders themselves.



Web-Empower Your Church: Unleashing the Power of Internet Ministry (Book)

Mark M. Stephenson, Author. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006.

Reminding readers that Internet ministry is a "God thing," Mark Stephenson lays out the tools needed to create, maintain, and update a dynamic congregational website. Stephenson draws on his experience as the "Church Cyber Guy" at Ginghamburg Church and his expertise as the leader of Web Empowered Church to explain what works and what doesn't when engaging in cyber ministry. A key piece of advice: "start by building a team that can carry out the many diverse tasks that such a ministry entails." This book, with an accompanying CD-ROM, will support any church seeking to develop a website that empowers all who preach, teach, pray, and serve in a congregation.



What No One Ever Tells You About...Blogging and Podcasting: Real Life Advice from 101 People Who Successfully Leverage the Power of the Blogosphere (Book)

Ted Demopoulos, Author. Chicago, IL: Kaplan Publishing, 2007.

If you are committed to making blogs and podcasts a reality—or a more effective reality—in your congregation, this book offers concrete advice and plenty of enthusiasm. Ted Demopoulos begins with the basics—outlining what a blog is, what a podcast is, and the value of blogging. Advice on planning, implementing, and reviewing blogs follows, along with tips on promoting your blog and tracking blog traffic. The book then discusses the elements of great podcasts and explains the process of converting blogs to podcasts. Issues surrounding security, anonymity, and intellectual property are addressed. A look at the future of blogging and the promise of "videoblogging" concludes the book.



The Wired Church 2.0 (Book)

Len Wilson, Author. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008.

Len Wilson and Jason Moore, owners of Midnight Oil Productions, explain the importance of using strong digital media to communicate the gospel in worship, as well as the importance of developing a clear mission statement to support the wise use of resources for media ministry. More than that, Wilson and Moore examine the components of designing media for worship—including building visual elements, doing video production, creating graphics, training a team, and phasing in the plan so that everything works smoothly. While any media ministry process will not be easy—and some costs in time, money, and learning curves will be incurred—the results can be transformational for worshippers.