Towards a theology of virtual Christian community

A dissertation submitted to the University of Wales

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Summary of work

The Ship of Fools website conducted an ambitious experiment in virtual Christian community (VXC) during the summer of 2004, which stimulated discussion of a wide range of theological and sociological issues. Commentators often adopted quite extreme utopian or dystopian positions with respect to VXC.

These positions were explored in chapter 2 through analysis of discussions of VXC on Slashdot – a large discussion site for IT professionals – and a Spurgeon's College tutorial group. Three proposed functions for VXC with respect to conventional expressions of church were identified in these discourses. The main area of concern centred around the possibility or otherwise of experiencing authentic Christian communion mediated electronically.

Assumptions about the meaning of 'virtual' and 'real' were found to underly much of the discussion. Chapter 3 examines three of the more common assumptions in the light of recent research into Internet use, which suggests that virtual interaction is treated as a valuable facet of everyday life, into which it is increasingly integrated. Consideration of virtuality in the Bible focuses on Paul's ministry.

In chapter 4 a perspective on New Testament ecclesiology is presented in which local expressions of church are vitally important but nonetheless derived from the universal church. VXC is thus best seen as one sub-optimal expression among others of the universal church. Dulles' models of church[1] form the basis for discussion of the types of ecclesiology which might be appropriate in virtuality. Among the issues raised are the feasibility of gathering and eucharist via this medium.

Chapter 5 takes a qualitative look at Church of Fools, and identifies some of the features that might form the basis of a cultural-linguistic model of VXC. The dissertation concludes in chapter 6 with a proposed list of key elements of VXC ecclesiology.

[1] A. Dulles, Models of the Church, 2e (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1984)

Declarations and Statements

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed 28th September 2005

Statement 1

This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MTh in Applied Theology

Signed 28th September 2005

Statement 2

This dissertation is the result of my own independent work and investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A biography is appended.

Signed 28th September 2005

Statement 3

I hereby give my consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed 28th September 2005

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Ch 1: A case study in Virtual Christian Community

The building looks like a typical anglican sanctuary to my untrained, non-conformist eye. From the doorway I can see an altar in front of a large stained glass window. To the right is an organ, to the left are the stations of the cross. I walk down the central aisle, past solitary worshippers kneeling in silent prayer, to join the nearest group. The platinum blonde in the flowery top is laughing outloud, while the older guy in the pinstripe suit is scratching his head. The girl, Gloria[2], lives in Maryland, the guy, Frank, is from mainland China, and they appear to be comparing notes on churchmanship. Gloria turns towards me and asks if this is my first visit to the church. I start to answer, but suddenly the image on my screen vanishes, to be replaced with a login window. Such are the joys of cutting edge technology.

"A demonstration is worth a thousand arguments.[3]" (French proverb)

Figure 1: A screenshot of the Church of Fools 3D environment

[2] Here, and throughout this document, screen names and biographical information have been modified to respect the privacy of Church of Fools users.

[3] Une démonstration vaut mille discussions.

Hundreds of thousands of people from around the world logged into Church of Fools during the summer of 2004 and experienced an attempt "... to create sacred space on the Internet"[4]. Church of Fools (CoF) was produced by Ship of Fools, a Christian website whose previous projects include The Ark - an Internet-based Bible-themed reality TV show - and The Mystery Worshipper – something akin to a road test for congregations. The main sponsors of the CoF experiment were the Methodist Church and Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London, who preached at the inaugural service. Other preachers included the American evangelical Tony Campolo.

From its launch date of the 11th May 2004 until its closure in October 2004, CoF attracted a huge amount of attention from Christians and non-Christians alike. The project received extensive coverage in the secular media, including the Times, Guardian and Herald Tribune newspapers, Reader's Digest, the BBC (radio, TV and website), CNN, technical websites such as slashdot.org and theregister.co.uk and even *Max*, a French "lad's mag". The software was stretched to maximum capacity throughout the project, with tens of thousands of attempted connections per day, and up to 3,000 concurrently connected participants on occasions[5].

Technology was certainly one reason for the phenomenal interest generated by CoF. The interface looked like a computer game, where users pilot their avatar[6] though a 3D space and interact with others in real time. CoF was free and the software was easy to install. It was therefore an ideal starting point for those wishing to sample virtual worlds, whatever their views on Christianity.

The Christian basis of CoF was also clearly of interest to many participants and commentators. Theological questions were raised on IT websites such as slashdot.org. In some cases, users who self-identifed as non-Christian nevertheless tried to work out how Christianity could be practised online, eg "I'm not a religious man myself but I wonder..."

The slashdot.org discussion was quite polarised. This is typical of forums[7]. However, a tutorial

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4 http://www.churchoffools.com, May 2004.

5 The software only allowed around 30 concurrent users to use all the available functions, but much larger numbers of users could connect as "ghosts", which enabled them to explore the site without being visible to others.

6 Avatar is used throughout in the IT sense of an image representing a user. While the word obviously carries religious baggage, it is less confusing than the alternatives, especially "character", which implies role play.

7 Various explanations have been offered for the adversarial flavour of online discussions, including theories about the reduction of social inhibitions due to perceived anonimity and the limited consequences of sociopathic behaviour,

discussion I led in 2001 on the subject "Can Christian community be virtual?", for a group of theology students, took a strikingly similar form. It seems that the concept of online church, and of online community in general, generates excitement and horror in equal measure. Hakken (1999) refers to the positive and negative ends of the discussion as computopian and compputropian[8], while Wellman and Haythornwaite describe how "... the very term 'Internet' became a kind of 'garbage can' a receptacle for both fame and infamy related to any electronic activity or societal change"[9]. The aim of this theological reflection is to unpack what is behind both reactions, and to work towards a way of understanding the phenomenon typified by CoF, referred to below as Virtual Christian Community (VXC).

My committed standpoint

In these twilight years of modernity, it is generally accepted that the quest for The Objective Position from which to conduct research is doomed to failure, especially when the object of study is any form of social interaction. Since the researcher's personal baggage has an effect on the direction of research, it seems prudent to begin by unpacking some of mine, especially as it may differ from that of many writing about Christianity and the Internet.

In the course of studying CoF, I have become an "insider". The process involved lurking[10] and then participating in SoF activities, being co-opted onto a consultative group for CoF, taking a leading role in addressing various technical issues during the experiment, becoming one of the CoF site administrators and playing an ongoing role in shaping the future direction of the project. Along the way I have met the founders of SoF in the UK several times, and had extensive discussions with many of the other leaders from around the world.

Participant observation is an accepted methodology within ethnology. Hakken points to interviewing, informal discussion, direct group observation and, especially, active participation in

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but a more prozaic reason is that posting just to agree with a previous post is considered to be a waste of everyone's bandwidth and therefore bad "netiquette". Other mechanisms exist for assessing the opinion of online communities, including straw polls.

8 D. Hakken, Cyborgs@Cyberspace? : an ethnographer looks to the future, (London: Routledge 1999) p17

9 B. Wellman & C. Haythornthwaite (Eds), The Internet in everyday life, (Oxford: Blackwell 2002) p4

10 Lurking is the term for community members who follow the community's activities but never participate actively, with the result that they are almost invisible.

group practices as the core activities of the ethnographer[11]. Far from seeking objectivity, the ethnographer "wallows in [...] the observer effect"[12]. The extent of my own wallowing was not entirely premeditated, but I was relieved to discover that I am not the first researcher to be sucked into a virtual world[13].

Commitment to a community does not necessary imply uncritical acceptance of its status quo, especially when the community in question has always made a virtue of unrest. The CoF experiment was exactly that, and, while we have developed various habits and traditions along the way, absolutely everything about the project is still up for negotiation at the time of writing. However, my involvement in the project does mean that, on a visceral level, I have immense difficulty taking seriously the suggestion that VXC is in some sense illusory. My often intense experience over the past few months has been that *something* is happening in CoF that is community-based and authentically spiritual. I am open to discussing and critiquing *what* is happening. But I have to be honest and say that VXC is no longer a hypothesis for me. It has become part of my personal Christian praxis. A demonstration is indeed worth a thousand arguments.

I am also an insider as far as the Internet is concerned. I first came across Arpanet – one of the precursors to the Internet – in 1985 while completing a student placement at the Ministry of Defence. Since then I have set up local and wide area networking for several organisations. In 2001 I started an IT company in France that provides website creation and hosting services for around 100 websites, and which ran a cybercafe for over three years. I specialise in CGI programming[14], and undertake contracts in this domain for other webmasters on a regular basis.

My impression is that many of those writing about Christianity and the Internet have a limited grasp of the technology[15]. Understanding the mechanisms that underpin the Internet is obviously

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[11] Hakken (1999) p39

[12] Ibid p40

[13] A. DuVal Smith, "Problems of conflict management in virtual communities", in M. A. Smith and P. Kollock (Eds), *Communities in cyberspace*, (London: Routledge 1999). The author her research observing MicroMUSE and ended up occupying a quasi-official conflict resolution rôle.

[14] The most popular technology for creating interactive websites, from webmail and forums to e-commerce sites.

[15] Cf Hine's wry observation that "... ethnographers often develop only limited competences in the technical work which their informants do, as if incompetence was in some way strategic in maintaining strangeness." (C. Hine, *Virtual ethnography*, (London: Sage Publications 2000) p54)

useful when considering a topic such as VXC. However, after 20 years of Internet experience, I have the utmost difficulty adopting the perspective of a "newbie"[16].

Within the rather wide and nebulous group of those who are said to "know about computers", my primary interest has always been programming, ie creating new ways of interacting with computers or modifying existing ones. In contrast to much writing on Christianity and the Internet which assumes that the various Internet technologies are to be evaluated as shrink-wrapped products whose properties have already been defined, I tend to see the Internet as the ultimate open-ended programming opportunity. This perspective partially undergirds my conviction that *if* VXC has a future, my *a priori* assumption is that it will gradually adopt its own distinctive forms of expression. "The Internet is a text that is both read and written by its users [...] What comes to be seen as self-evidently the way the Internet is, will be the upshot of a long history of negotiations about appropriate use."[17] If Christians have an opinion on what the Internet should become, the time to start reading, writing and negotiating is now, while the form and function of the Internet are still to be fully determined[18].

[16] Common term for a new and therefore inexperienced user in the context of online community.

[17] Hine (2000) p147, p154

[18] D. Pullinger, *Information Technology and Cyberspace: Extra-connected Living*, (London: Darton Longman and Todd 2001) p126

Ch 2: Reactions to Virtual Christian Community

Given my committed personal standpoint, it is important to take seriously the concerns of those with more distance from VXC. Looking closely at the critiques offered by secular and theological audiences -specifically the Slashdot discussion and a Spurgeons tutorial group - is one way to ensure that the other side of the argument is heard.

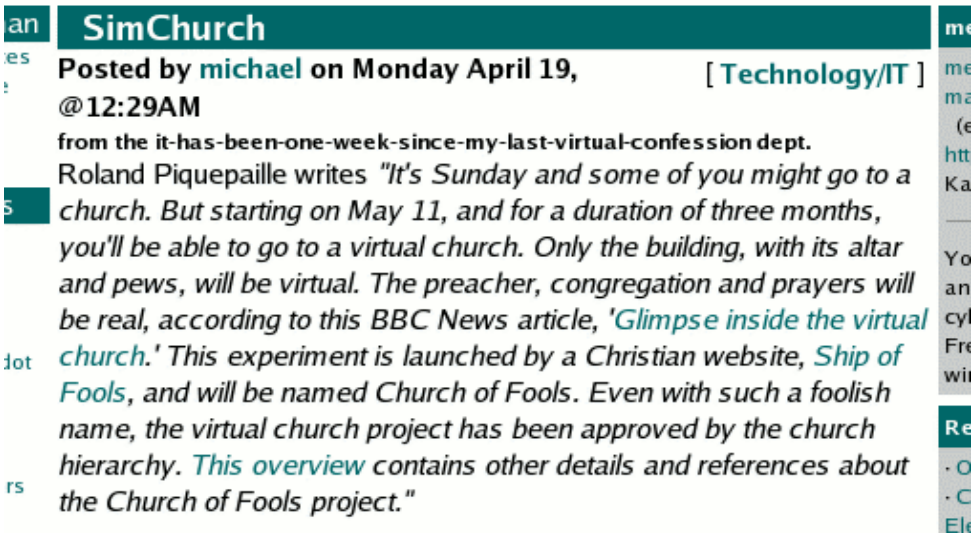
There was some overlap between the two discussions. To avoid needless repetition, the issues will be dealt with one at a time, wherever they were raised. But before looking that the issues themselves, it might be useful to describe the contexts of the discussions.

The Slashdot discussion

Slashdot is one of the world's most popular IT-focused websites. A high proportion of "slashdotters" are North American, but the UK is also well-represented.

Figure 2 shows the story that was posted on the slashdot.org homepage on the 19th April 2004, in the site's distinctive format. The story was submitted by a certain Roland Piquepaille and selected by Michael from the editorial team, who has classified the story as "technology/IT" and added the "virtual confession" kicker. The title, SimChurch, makes allusion to The Sims, the popular online game, the avatars of which are in a similar style to those in CoF. Links are shown in green: in this case, there is a link to an article on the BBC website and two links to SoF.

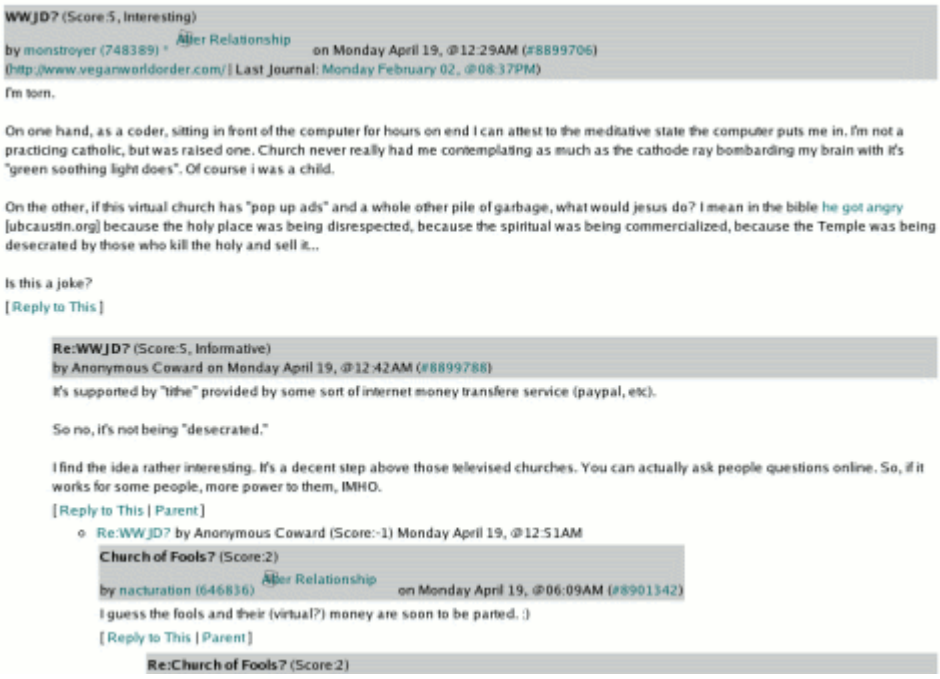
Figure 2: Screenshot of the Slashdot article presenting Church of Fools



Slashdot users can post comments below the story. Figure 3 shows the format of part of the discussion that ran to 597 comments and, when printed, were 156 A4 pages in length.

The Slashdot software is unusual in several respects. Most forums display comments in linear form, and are moderated by a small team of administrators. In contrast, Slashdot adopts a threaded structure, where comments are attached to the previous comment to which they refer. Comments are almost never removed or edited[19], although they may be sidelined and ignored.

Figure 3: Screenshot of part of the Slashdot discussion of the Church of Fools article



Threading enables simultaneous discussion of many facets of a topic, with each facet ending up in its own thread. By contrast, in non-threaded discussions, the first few posts tends to determine the direction of subsequent posts. The aim of studying the Slashdot discussion is to identify the range of issues raised by VXC, and threading clearly increases the potential usefulness of the discussion in that respect.

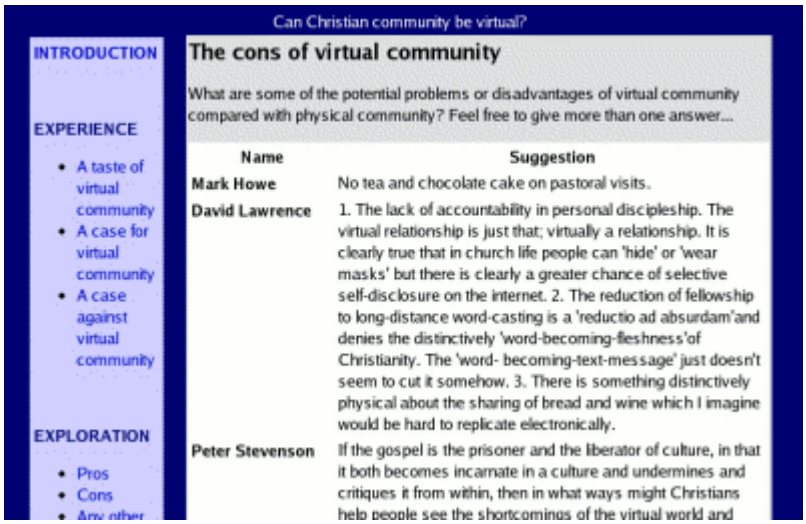
[19] Exceptions include html that breaks the website and comments resulting in threatened litigation.

The Spurgeons tutorial discussion

In 2001 I was asked to propose a topic for theological reflection for the tutorial group to which I belonged as part of the MTh course. The group was for those students who were unable to attend a physical meeting for reasons of distance. Group members were based in Australia, France, Germany, Pakistan and various parts of the UK.

Initial discussions had been conducted using a simple mailing list, in which everyone received copies of each other's mail. It seemed to me that this format encouraged participants to submit mini-essays rather than interact, and I suggested conducting the next discussion using a very basic forum system that I wrote for the occasion. Figure 4 shows part of one of the discussion pages.

Figure 4: Part of the Spurgeons tutorial discussion on virtual community



The topic was "Can Christian community be virtual?" To start the discussion, I posted a brief case in favour of the statement, and asked David Buick - a pastor who I knew from previous discussions to be skeptical about the concept – to write a similar case opposing the statement. Three pages were provided for responses, under the headings "pros", "cons" and "other comments". Most participants posted two or three times during the exploration phase. Attempts to move the discussion onto more detailed reflection proved unsuccessful, possibly because none of us had much practical experience of VXC on which to draw at the time.

The discussions provided insights on a number of levels. We will first consider global understandings of VXC before listing concerns about specific aspects of the concept.

Ways of viewing virtual Christian community

A route into church

From this perspective, VXC is interesting to the extent that it acts as a stepping stone to "the real thing", usually meaning a conventional church. Thus one tutorial participant spoke of "...an initial contact which might pave the way for certain kinds of people to move on towards participation in more face to face kinds of community".

One early contribution to the Slashdot discussion included the statement "I can't imagine a less threatening atmosphere than a church". This prompted dozen of responses from those who felt that some or all churches were extremely threatening, especially to outsiders, and that VXC would fare better in this respect.

A related idea was that of establishing a witness in cyberspace, the latter being viewed as a new country or culture to reach in much the same way as more traditional missionary strategy aims to take the gospel to different geographical locations or people groups. The same participant asked "[How] does the gospel become incarnate in the virtual world of IT?" The aim of such incarnation is to reach a position of credibility from which the virtual world can be critiqued, and through which individuals can be invited to discover "... a whole body experience of Christianity".

Substitute for church

From this perspective, VXC is the next best thing to physical church for certain groups who cannot benefit from "the real thing". Suggestions included missionaries, the housebound, those living in remote areas and those "threatened or hurt" by churches. Thus "I think part of the purpose of this virtual church is not to replace bricks-and-mortar churches, but to make a church experience accessible to people who (for whatever reason) never considered attending an actual church." It was pointed out that video link-ups, or even receiving replies to questions in hours or days by email, is a far richer experience than receiving a prayer letter every few months. Those proposing this perspective seemed to assume that in an ideal world everyone would have access to physical church.

Horses for courses

From this perspective, VXC is seen to offer advantages over physical church. It was felt, for

example, that VXC might provide a multicultural dimension that is missing from some churches. Some felt that the Internet could provide a more interactive experience than many churches. The question of 24-hour access was also raised (This is considered feasible either because there is always something happening on the Internet or because media such as email and fora allow people to interact without being connected at the same time).

Concerns raised in the discussions

Money

This was not mentioned at all in the tutorial discussion, but was raised a number of times on Slashdot. One of the earlier posts stated "I guess a fool and his (virtual) money are soon to be parted", while another suggested that users would have the choice of either giving by PayPal[20] or "hanging your head in virtual shame". Another post compared online church with Nigerian email scams[21]. Pop-up advertising and membership fees were of particular concern.

As several posts pointed out, SoF has a very low-key approach to fundraising, limited to banner advertising[22] and the occasional request for donations on the members' section of the forum. The immediate concern (expressed before CoF opened) therefore seems unwarranted. However, it is clear that the way money is handled is a concern for those not currently involved in the project. Furthermore, projects such as CoF require large injections of cash to cover development and running costs, so it is not possible to avoid financial issues. Community websites are notorious for running at a loss, and Christian outreach is not generally a moneyspinner either, so developing financial mechanisms that are acceptable to the users and capable of covering the costs of projects such as CoF is likely to be one of the practical challenges faced by the leadership in the medium term.

Dealing with troublemakers

A number of posts on Slashdot predicted problems with various forms of disruption, eg "If I were the preacher, I would be [...] scared about how much script kiddies would come to deface this

[20] a way of transferring funds between individuals and small organisations.

[21] A common form of fraud in which bank details are gained via unsolicited email or fax enlisting help in liberating a large sum of money.

[22] Adverts that appear at the top of certain pages.

virtual church. I really hope he is aware of what can happen on the Internet these days...". This post was rated as "funny" by the moderators. Particular concern was expressed about trolling[23] and DDoS attacks[24].

It is perhaps not surprising that, on this issue, the comments of Slashdot users turned out to be prescient. The naivety of the CoF leadership concerning Internet security issues was shortlived, as large numbers of trolls turned up within the first few hours (the user called Satan who occupied the pulpit on the first day attracted more media attention than most). Various attempts were also made to attack the software itself, triggering a kind of software arms race that continued until the end of the experiment.

A slightly different perspective was that an online church would end up excluding anyone who rocks the boat: "Jesus went to the synagogue just like everyone else but sometimes got booted out because he was trolling. I guess the holy cyber people will find a way of booting out the riff raff like they booted that troublemaker Jesus out too."

This issue, while superficially a technical one, merits more detailed examination, as it in turn raises issues about power, inclusiveness and the nature of belonging.

Eucharist

One Slashdot user wrote, "... most Catholics would show up at a real church since communion is a big part of church." A tutorial contributor with a house church background pointed out that "There is something distinctly physical about the sharing of bread and wine which I imagine would be hard to replicate electronically". We will consider eucharist below.

Worship or entertainment?

"Is this a joke?", asked one Slashdot post. The title Church of Fools and the satirical nature of much of the SoF website caused some to wonder if the announcement was serious, or whether the aim was to parody other churches in the style of the Landover Baptist Church website[25]. More generally, some felt that an online church inherently cheapened the concept of church. Thus "Now you can go to church, read Slashdot and watch porn all at the same time", and "This is just wrong

[23] The generic term for users who take part with the intention of causing offence and/or stirring up violent discussions.
[24] Distributed Denial of Service attack, an increasingly popular form of hacking.
[25] http://www.landoverbaptist.org

on so many levels... 'The blood of Christ, shed for you', in underwear, toasting a beer" and, from the tutorial group, "You can church when you feel like it; the consumer is king". The question that needs to be answered here is therefore whether the Internet – when used by the general public – can be anything other than an entertainment medium.

Elitism

One tutorial contributor asked if virtual community is "... only really an option for those of us who are rich in terms of IT". The concern here is that the technology disproportionately excludes the computer-illiterate, the poor in all countries, and those living in poorer countries. In response, one Slashdot post saw alarm about online church as "... the typical response to technology", and pointed out that when the first TV broadcasts of church services took place, "... receiving a good broadcast signal may have been only marginally more common than broadband today."

This question has been raised many times in the sociological literature on Internet usage, so it can be addressed empirically. Briefly, Internet access is still skewed in favour of young, white, male, graduate, middle/upper class North Americans, but the inequalities are shrinking[26]. In the case of CoF, according to an online questionnaire completed by 2,400 visitors, 38% of users were female, 50% were over 30 years old and 32% were over 40 years old, although over 85% of visitors were from Europe or North America.

Can authentic community be mediated by the Internet?

The most frequent concern expressed in the Slashdot discussion, and in the tutorial group, was that virtual community is unable to deliver critical aspects of true community:

- **Lack of accountability**: "There is clearly a greater chance of selective self-disclosure on the Internet."
- **Excessive dependence on words**: "Much preaching, little spirituality; many words, few symbols; full of knowledge (as data); short on wisdom (as mystery)". "At no point in Church history has anyone considered that gathering together is equivalent to industrious letter-writing." Other posts centred on the lack of informal and non-verbal feedback to compliment the main

[26] W. Chen, J. Boase and B. Wellman, "The global villagers: comparing Internet users and uses around the world", in Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002) p77

communication channels. VXC was felt to be a bad context in which to resolve conflicts or build confidence between people for this reason. One tutorial participant spoke of how extensive use of email, telephone and video conferencing in a business context had not reduced his need to travel in order to build project teams. He felt that a lot happened outside the scheduled meetings, over coffee or dinner, and that there was no equivalent to this in VXC. A Slashdot post stated that "It is like a family reunion... in a chat room. You might all be there, but you can't express emotion or body language that gives depth to any sort of relationship."

- **No social outworking**: "How would it impact on the Gospel's social imperatives to compassion, justice and mercy?"
- **No physical contact**: "There has to be physical interaction: hugs, tears, laughter, a hand." There was also a feeling that being together has to mean physical proximity (thus “Can we expect to experience the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in splendid isolation?”, where “splendid isolation” appears to refer to VXC). It was suggested that part of the problem is due to the “clunkiness” of current computer analogues of physical interaction. One participant suggested (only partly in jest) that the church should have another look at cyberchurch once cybersex is a viable reality, as, in his view, worship and seduction require a similar quality of sensory information.
- **Limited affective content**: "One thing that you get from a congregation of real people is LOVE, and no matter how you try to simulate that, it can't be done." A few posts took an opposite view, ie "I have been part of communities in online text-based RPG[27]s, and those communities have felt *extremely* real. We all cared about each other, we hated our enemies, we spent absurd amounts of time supporting one another (which is one reason why I stopped) etc." It was suggested that the level of investment of the users had a big effect on the strength of feelings of community.

The conclusion of those mentioning such limitations was generally that "It's bad to depend on the Internet for your social fix." or "Watching a webcast or something like it just isn't the same. Anyone who has watched [...] Songs of Praise will back me up on that one."

The response to this type of criticism was often along the lines that community could be formed

[27] Role playing games

on the basis of less stringent requirements, eg "As long as there is a way for people to become involved, it's a community" and "Whether it's over the telephone, or SMS, or an online 3D representation, it's still interaction between humans."

From exploration to reflection

The two discussions raised a range of concerns, as well as suggesting several ways of understanding VXC. Much theological thinking has focused on the nature of real-life Christian community – often called 'church' – and the social sciences have conducted wide-ranging research into Internet use generally and online communities in particular. But first it is necessary to look more closely at the meaning of 'virtual' and 'real'.

Ch 3: On virtual and real

The word 'virtual', like 'e-', is used routinely as a prefix to show that whatever follows has something to do with computing, usually in the context of the Internet[28]. However, the term 'virtual' often carries baggage that can make discussion of what actually happens on the Internet problematic. The online encyclopedia Wikipedia[29] states that

> Colloquially, 'virtual' has a similar meaning to 'quasi-' or 'pseudo-' (prefixes which themselves have quite different meanings), meaning something that is almost something else, particularly when used in the adverbial form, e.g. "He's virtually [almost] my boyfriend." ... In computing virtual is what does not physically exist, but is made to appear to by software: examples this usage can clearly be seen in virtual memory and, although somewhat differently, in the popular sci-fi/IT concept of 'virtual reality'.

If VXC 'does not physically exist', but is merely 'made to appear' by clever programming and powerful servers, most Christians would probably agree that it is of very limited interest as a way of expressing Christian community. If some parties in a discussion take that definition of 'virtual' as given, it is clearly going to be hard for them to take the concept seriously. What follows is my attempt to address what I see as the more unhelpful connotations of virtuality, based on recent work in the social sciences, before moving on to look at the reality-virtuality dimension in the church.

Virtual does not mean unreal

In this usage, 'virtual' comes to mean 'fake' or 'imitation'. Thus virtual community, like virtual relationship, is an oxymoron, a diabolical ruse to keep people away from the real thing. To quote one tutorial discussion participant, "A virtual relationship is just that: virtually a relationship."

This is essentially the position taken by Quentin Schultze[30], whose book is subtitled "living *virtuously* in the information age" (original italics). Cyber-community is "... less a forum for shared public life than an arena for individuals to express their egos and find information in tune with their personal needs and desires."[31] If we spend too much time in cyberspace, "... we become high-tech nomads, most in non-intimate existence, deprived of the potential virtues cultivated primarily

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[28] Woolgar describes this as an example of "epithetized phenomena" (S. Woolgar (Ed), *Virtual society? get real! : the social science of electronic technologies*, (Oxford: University Press 2002) p3)

[29] http://www.wikipedia.org

[30] Q. J. Schultze, *Habits of the high-tech heart: Living virtuously in the information age*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2002)

[31] Schultze (2002) p180

within proximate community."[32] Cyberspace is most accurately seen through "... the metaphor of the libertine web surfer, a selfish bandit grabbing all the digital gusto he or she can."[33] The opposite of virtual is virtuous, authentic, and virtuousness requires slow communication ("restricting bandwidth is a moral task[34]") and traditional media ("Even the most seemingly routinized practices, such as clanging bells that call area believers to prayer at sunrise each day, can remind believers to be faithful practitioners."[35]

Much of Schultze's argument proceeds by comparing an idealised rendering of authentic community with worst practice on the Internet, for example when he repeatedly conflates attempts to build online communities with the financial malpractice associated with the dot com bubble[36]. Furthermore, idealised authentic community is always in the past, while demonised pseudocommunity is "new". Thus Shultze starts each chapter with quotes from Tocqueville's study of American society... in the 1830s. The Amish are Schultze's favourite example of a community that has avoided the pitfalls typified in cyberspace.

Neophobia is nothing new. Katz and Rice point out that Franklin and Jefferson expressed concerns about early American community life similar to those expressed continually since World War II[37]. Unease about the social implications of communication technology "... started earnestly shortly after the telegraph was invented, and was reinvigorated and intensified as each new communication technology became popular"[38]. Hakken notes that the decoupling of space from place began with the telephone[39].

Old and new are relative terms. When Shultze ridicules his contemporaries for believing "... in a promising high-tech future, not an old-fashioned mechanical past"[40], he overlooks the fact that the Industrial Revolution was once the high-tech future, and that it led to enormous changes at all levels

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[32] Schultze (2002) p186-187
[33] Schultze (2002) p182
[34] Schlutze (2002) p 49
[35] Schultze (2002) p75
[36] Shultze (2002) p193, for example
[37] J. E. Katz and R. E. Rice, "Syntopia: Access, civic involvement and social interaction on the Net", in Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002) p123
[38] Katz and Rice (2002)
[39] Hakken (1999) p90
[40] Schultze (2002) p15

of society, not all of which are self-evidently virtuous. The clanging bells in the tower of a parish church may, like a Turner painting, conjure up images of pastoral bliss, but the technology involved is still post-biblical. While it is probably true on one level that "All new information technologies [...] carry the potential to further unravel our communities and dampen our habits of the heart", potential is not the same as causality, and the potential for both good and evil is surely present in technologies and structures of any vintage, as the number of quips in the Slashdot discussion about institutionalised child abuse by priests remind us.

But perhaps the biggest problem with Schultze's thesis is that it is based on contrasting the virtual with a model of authentic community that is certainly atypical and probably downright mythical. Wellman and Gulia state that "It is not clear if [the standard pastoralist ideal of in-person, village-like community] has ever been the case – it might be pure nostalgia – but contemporary communities in the western world are quite different. Most community ties are specialised and do not form close clusters of relationships."[41] Christine Hine observes how arguments about the authenticity of online community "... often [hark] back to a romanticized view of traditional communities"[42]. Geography is no longer the only way to define the boundaries of a community. Social network analysts have argued for the primacy of the social over the spacial in community since before the appearance of the Internet[43], and the Anglican report "Mission-shaped church" notes that "... the place where people live is decreasingly of importance to them – the important parts of their lives, and important friendships and experiences, are elsewhere."[44] Indeed, I wonder how many "local" churches could survive in their present form without motorised transport and telephones[45].

Virtual does not mean 'real minus'

This usage is more subtle than the 'virtual is unreal' one. Those using the term in this way are generally relatively positive towards the Internet. The approach, applied to VXC, could be

41 B. Wellman and M. Gulia, "Virtual communities as communities: Net surfers don't ride alone", in Smith and Kollock (2000) p171

42 Hine (2000) p19

43 K. N. Hampton and B. Wellman, "The not so global village of Netville", in Wellman and Haytornthwaite 2002

44 *Mission-shaped Church: church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context*, (London: Church House 2004) pp62-63

45 Cf Smith and Kollock p17

summarised as "How much of what we currently do in our local church could be done virtually?" From this perspective, it is possible to see VXC as a means of evangelism or as a ministry for those unable to attend church, for example.

One exponent of this approach is Patrick Dixon, who presents himself as a futurologist and castigates the church for its backward-looking approach to new technology[46]. He gives a number of present and near-future examples of Christian interaction over the Internet, including communication with missionaries[47], evangelism[48], prayer and worship[49]. However, the title of his book notwithstanding[50], Dixon dismisses the possibility of cyberchurch:

> We are brothers and sisters to each other, in close relationship, with eternal bonds of mutual commitment and self-sacrifice. The biblical picture of a church is of a gathered community, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people called by God out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9). None of this can be fulfilled merely by virtual reality relationships, where people can unplug the modem every time they feel like giving up on people.[51]

It seems to me that Dixon, like Schultze, adopts an unrealistic understanding of what happens in conventional churches. Not getting out of bed on a Sunday morning as a way to avoid community is arguably even simpler than unplugging the modem, and it is clear that plenty of people manage to stay on the fringes of church life, switch churches when convenient or drop out altogether.

The approach is also subtly but nonetheless seriously ethnocentric. By taking one expression of Christian community as the benchmark against which others can be judged, it is almost inevitable that other expressions will be found wanting. In our context, VXC will always be evaluated as "real community minus certain key attributes to be found in my local church", hence the "real minus" title of this section. While it is premature to rule out the possibility that VXC *is* deficient in critical ways, this approach precludes the possible discovery that certain real-life expressions of church are deficient when viewed from the perspective of VXC.

To see why this is the case, it might be useful to consider another relatively new technology, the telephone. It is clear that the telephone is a very limited medium compared with face to face

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[46] P. Dixon, *Cyberchurch: Christianity and the Internet*, (Eastbourne: Kingsway 1997) p46
[47] Dixon (1997) p64
[48] Dixon (1997) p69
[49] Dixon (1997) p91
[50] Cyberchurch
[51] Dixon (1997) p94

conversation. There are no non-verbal cues, no possibility of physical contact and very little shared context. However, it is also clear that the telephone has advantages beyond enabling communication at a distance. We might say that the telephone is less intrusive and potentially less threatening than someone arriving at your front door. A telephone conversation can happen at the same time as other activities. Telephones can save lives in an emergency. And anyone with teenage children will confirm that the telephone can compete with face to face communication, even when a physical meeting would be easy to arrange. The view of telephone usage as "face to face communication minus..." cannot take into account any of the ways in which telephones surpass face to face communication, and is therefore unable to explain why people use telephones. The error is on the same level as dismissing pre-industrial cultures as simple because they do not make much use of technology.

To return to Dixon's chosen Bible passage, it could, for example, be argued that physical church is deficient in its expression of the biblical notion of holy nation (and, for that matter, of what is sometimes called universal church). Physical church might express gathered church better than VXC, and so on. But a fair comparison of different expressions of church cannot be achieved if one expression is accepted *a priori* as normative.

Virtual is not independent of real

Commentators often write as if virtual community operates in a totally separate sphere to "normal" life. This is what Wellman and Haythornwaite call "... the fundamental sin of particularism, thinking of the Internet as a lived experience distinct from the rest of life"[52]. Recent research shows that Internet usage by the general population is increasingly an integral part of "normal" life, and that it is not possible to draw a neat line between a person's real-life and virtual activities. "Emerging virtual social systems and flows are becoming ever more enmeshed with other social dynamics, to the extent that any useful distinction between the 'virtual' and the 'real' has all but collapsed.[53]" Anderson and Tracey conclude that Internet services and applications "... are not changing the way people live their lives in a simple, straightforward manner, but are supporting

[52] Wellman and Haythornwaite (2002), p5

[53] S. Nettleton et al, "The reality of virtual social support", in Woolgar (2002) p177

their existing lifestyles, whatever those lifestyles would be..."[54]. They see the Internet not as a new type of activity, but as a new way of doing old things that fits in better with their lifestyle[55]. They found no evidence that Internet use reduces time spent using other media or socialising[56].

Robinson et al[57] found that Internet users read more printed media than non-users, spend more time attending real-world events, are statistically indistinguishable from non-users by other categories of time use, yet claim to have eight hours a week *more* free time than non-users[58]. The authors suggest that the Internet acts as a "time enhancer" similar to other home appliances[59]. Wagner et al found that Internet users attend more live concerts and theatre performances[60]. Hampton et al, in their study of a housing estate equipped with an experimental high-speed computer networking system, found that "Wired [...] residents neighbour much more than those who are offline"[61]. Katz and Rice found that Internet users spent as much time involved in real-world religious organisations, and belonged to more religious groups, than non-users[62], that they were more likely to vote in national elections[63], were more likely to use the phone and were more likely to have physical meetings with friends[64]. They conclude that Internet use increases community and political involvement and both online and offline social interaction[65]. Apart from contradicting the stereotypical image of the uncultured, irreligious, geekish sociopath, the above findings mean that we must reject the notion of the virtual and the real being in zero-sum competition.

Not only do the scheduling and priority of virtual and real-life activities coexist and interact in

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54 B. Anderson and K.Tracey, "The impact (or otherwise) of the Internet on everyday British life", in Wellman and Haytornewaite (2002) p141

55 Anderson and Tracey (2002) p160

56 Anderson and Tracey (2002) 157

57 J. P. Robinson, M. Kestnbaum, A. Neustadtl and A. S. Alvarez, "The Internet and other uses of time", in Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002)

58 Robinson et al (2002) p250

59 Robinson et al (2002) p257

60 G. G. Wagner, R. Pishner and J. P. Haisken-DeNew, "The changing digital divide in Germany", in Wellman and Haytornewaite (2002) p175

61 Hampton and Wellman (2002) p367

62 Katz and Rice (2002) p130

63 Katz and Rice (2002) p131

64 Katz and Rice (2002) p132

65 Katz and Rice (2002) p135

complex ways, relationships and communities often straddle both spheres. Thus, for example, the number of emails sent to a third party correlates positively with the number of phone calls and face to face meetings[66]. On reflection, this is hardly surprising, as people relate to other people rather than to the interface provided by a one or another medium. The community surrounding SoF often organises "shipmeets" all over the world, as well as an occasional weekend retreat, and the Ship has been the catalyst for several marriages.

None of this sounds much like Davis Smith's dualistic "escape into the cyberworld"[67]. David Hakken suggests that Internet users and their machines should rather be seen as a 'technology actor network' consisting of "... interacting human, organizational and artefactual entities and practices."[68] Hakken's contention that "Technology is so deeply implicated in our human existence that it is a core aspect of our being"[69] is not calculated to reassure the average church leader[70], but nevertheless seems to correspond to reality. At present, I am conscious of adding sentences to a dissertation, and I need to take a deliberate mental step back to focus on the act of typing and the complex technology that bridges the gap between my intentions and the appearance of crisp text on the screen. It seems extremely likely that Internet technology will be increasingly invisible for future generations because of its transparency, much as scissors become subjectively transparent when one uses them to cut paper.

Real and virtual Christianity

In the conclusion of his book, Schultze quotes several verses from John's Gospel, rendered in Peterson's *The Message*:

> Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you (Jn 15:4)
> I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you are joined with me and I with you, the relation is intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant (Jn 15:5)
> Make yourself at home in my love (Jn 15:9)

For Schultze, these verses, together with Jesus' injunction to lay down our lives for our friends,

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66 Chen et al (2002) p107

67 D. Smith, *Mission after christendom*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 2003) p98

68 Hakken (1999) p23

69 Hakken (1999) p72

70 Let alone the title of his book, "cyborgs@cyberspace"

show how what he calls "proximate community" is at the heart of Christian and Jewish tradition[71]. From my perspective, they seem rather to demonstrate the possibility of vital relationships that transcend space and time.

This Jesus, in whom we are called to live, and who lives in us, died, rose and ascended into heaven nearly two millenia before anyone reading this was born, yet Christians still believe that they can live "in Christ", to use Paul's turn of phrase. The vine metaphor similarly implies that the Christian and Christ are linked despite the fact that Jesus is not physically present, and, in addition, implies that the branches are related – could we say 'networked'? - to each other. The command to make ourselves at home in Christ's love, and the command to behave as Christ's friends, simply cannot refer to a friendship born out of physical proximity. The "mystery of friendship with God and neighbour"[72] is precisely that God can be our friend without living in our town, and the definition of a neighbour accepted by Jesus, "The one who had mercy on him"[73], is specified in functional rather than geographical terms – indeed the parable has teeth because Samaritans and the Jews did not live together.

It could be argued with some justification that extrapolating from relationship with God to relationship with each other is unwarranted. However, there are New Testament examples of human relations conducted largely or entirely without the benefit of proximate community. Paul writes to, say, the Corinthian church as if he has an intimate understanding of their situation and a close enough relationship to support stern exhortation, but, after his initial 18-month stay in the city, there is no evidence that he had further physical meetings with the church before penning both canonical epistles. His writing is based on the exchange of a maximum of six letters[74,] plus some oral reports brought to him by his coworkers and whatever insight the Holy Spirit gave him.

In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul writes in terms not dissimilar to those used by the Johannine Jesus: "I have you in my heart."[75] Their relationship is founded on their shared

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71 Schultze (2002) p201

72 Schultze (2002) p201

73 Lk 10:37, NIV

74 Eg N. Hillyer, "2 Corinthians", in D. Guthrie et al, *New Bible Commentary*, 3e (Leicester: IVP 1970) p1050

75 Ph 1:7

experience of God's grace[76]. Paul longs to see the Philippians[77], but, whether or not his wish is fulfilled, he expects his relationship with the church to continue for as long as he lives[78]. The Philippians are his partners in the Gospel[79], his brothers[80], his dear friends[81], in the present tense. Despite the absence of a shared context (Paul was in prison[82]), the lack of non-verbal cues and a delivery time for letters measured in months or years, there is not the slightest hint that Paul considers himself to be involved in pseudo-community with the Philippian church. Similarly, Paul considers himself to be absent from the Colossian believers in body but present in spirit, and delights to 'see' the firmness of their faith[83]. This mechanism of very occasional visits supplemented by sporadic letters proved sufficient not just to console an old man in prison, but to lay the foundations for the explosive expansion of the Early Church.

Christians believe in one Church that transcends both space and time, and that they run their personal race before a great cloud of witnesses[84]. Congregational life was obviously a key part of New Testament praxis, but the degree of international interdependence between congregations is truly remarkable given the very limited technological means at their disposal[85]. If we return to Dixon's statement that

> We are brothers and sisters to each other, in close relationship, with eternal bonds of mutual commitment and self-sacrifice.[86]

no leap of the imagination is required to recognise that reality expressed fully in Paul's relationship to the Philippians, despite the undeniably virtual nature of their interaction.

My contention on the basis of what has been said so far is that there is no *a priori* reason to reject VXC. Empirical research undermines the more extreme dystopian visions of the Internet, while the picture of church painted for us in the New Testament is rich enough to allow for

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[76] Ph 1:7
[77] Ph 1:8, 4:1
[78] Ph 1:27
[79] Ph 1:5
[80] Ph 1:12
[81] Ph 2:12
[82] Ph 1:14
[83] Co 2:5
[84] Hb 12:1
[85] Although even that would not have been possible without the infrastructure put in place under the Pax Romana
[86] Dixon (1997) p46

relationships that are in no sense local, but which are nonetheless valid and healthy in Christian terms. In the context of churchmanship, Volf is correct to say that "What was legitimate during the New Testament period cannot be illegitimate today."[87]

However, the argument so far does not come close to justifying VXC as a valid and useful concept for today. The absence of a biblical case against cyberchurch is not equivalent to an endorsement of the concept. To move the discussion forward and draw meaningful conclusions about VXC, we need to reflect on how VXC compares to other expressions of church. It is to this task that we turn in the next chapter.

[87] M. Volf, *After our likeness: the church as the image of the Trinity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998) p21

Ch 4: Reflecting on expressions of Church

The New Testament understanding of Church

Twenty centuries after Jesus said "I will build my Church"[88], there is still no consensus on a working definition of the term. Etymology is of limited help, as the Greek words usually translated as 'church' are broad in scope[89]. *Ekklesia* was used by Greeks to describe a political meeting, in the Septuagint to refer to a gathering of Israel, in Acts 7:38 to refer to Israel as a whole and in Acts 19:32 to refer to a riotous mob. The less frequent terms *paneguris* and *plethos* are similarly nebulous, referring respectively to a gathering and a multitude. Vine proposes two applications of *ekklesia*, to refer to "the whole company of the redeemed throughout the present era" and, in the singular, to a group of believers[90].

Jesus says remarkably little about church, speaking instead at length about the Kingdom of God, and there is some doubt as to whether Matthew 16 refers to the same entity as the rest of the New Testament[91]. The book of Acts gives plenty of examples of the process by which churches were planted, but does not offer much insight into what the planters thought they were doing in theological terms, apart from the (admittedly revolutionary) discovery that salvation was available to Gentiles as well as Jews.

The bulk of biblical teaching on the nature of the Church is therefore to be found in the epistles. Crucially for our purposes, it seems that, when defining the church, the epistles refer to the first of Vine's two senses, referring to what is sometimes called the universal church, rather than a local congregation. For example, the list of singular objects given by Paul in Ephesians [92]includes The Body, and none of the other objects (Spirit, hope, Lord, God, Father, faith...) can be read as meaning "one per local congregation"[93]. In Corinthians, Paul states that "By one Spirit we were all

[88] Mt 16:18

[89] W. E. Vine (ed J. R. Kohlenberger III), *The expanded Vine's expository dictionary of New Testament words, special edition*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House 1984) p76

[90] Vine 1984 p76

[91] Eg "Jesus may mean the gathering of his apostles to form, under him, the house of David [...] through which salvation would come to the Gentiles" (D. W. B. Robinson, "Church", in Guthrie et al (1970) p205)

[92] Ep 4:4-6

[93] Volf (1998) cites Ro 12:5 and I Co 12:12-13 to show that "A congregation *is* the body of Christ in the particular locale in which it gathers" (p138), but this reading does not seem necessary. If Paul is talking about the one universal

baptised into one body", where 'all' has to include at least both Paul and the Corinthians. Believers are baptised into Christ, and therefore into his body, not into a congregation[94]. Peter's spiritual house with holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices to God[95] makes obvious allusion to the one temple in Jerusalem where God was said to dwell, rather than to the numerous synagogues that served the dispersed Jewish community. As mentioned previously, the metaphors of nation and people relate much more naturally to universal church than to a congregation in isolation.

On the other hand, when it comes to concrete action, the New Testament speaks in terms of creating, maintaining and multiplying local congregations. The test of the Christian's love for God, according to John, is the love "for his brother, who he has seen". The contrast in the verse is with the invisible God, but it seems fair to infer that loving Christians in general is not good enough either. Christ is repeatedly proclaimed as the head of the Church[96], but day to day leadership is local[97]. The theology of the universal church is mystical, whereas the teaching on local church life is thoroughly pragmatic, and devoid of the metaphysical except when the writer pulls back to look at the universal church of which the congregation is the local expression. The way believers live together locally is an outworking of universal church theology, vital because it is practical and incarnational, but nonetheless derivative. As Bosch puts it, "... although *ekklesia* in Paul usually refers to the local church, the wider fellowship is always presupposed."[98] Indeed, it could be argued that the New Testament does not present a doctrine of local church *per se,* and it is unclear what Paul would make of the contemporary habit of referring to local congregations as "the body".

In the epistles, as in Acts, a key feature of church for Paul is that its unity transcends three of the fundamental divisions in the social landscape of the First Century[99]. The very "mystery of Christ", revealed after centuries of waiting, is that Gentiles and Jews alike share in the promise that formerly

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body, his claim is that God distributes gifts (or, more accurately, the gifted) throughout his universal church. This could be that the necessary gifts for a local congregation will be providentially present, and, in any case, Paul has a habit of switching between discussions of local issues, explanations of his apostolic ministry and wider theological issues (2 Corinthians being perhaps the most notable example).

94 D. J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission*, (New York: Orbis 1991) p167

95 1 Pe 2:5

96 Eg Co 1:8

97 Eg Ti 2:15

98 Bosch (1991) p166

99 Ga 3:26

was restricted to Israel[100]. The vehemence of Paul's opposition to Peter's retreat into Jewish eating patterns can be explained by the centrality of inclusiveness – especially Jew/Gentile inclusiveness[101] – to Paul's vision of the church. The homogeneous group principle has no place in Paul's ecclesiology[102]. For him, a Jewish-only or Gentile-only church was simply a contradiction in terms.

There is a strong eschatological strand to Paul's ecclesiology, resulting in the "both now and not yet" tension that eschatological thinking often stimulates. So, on the one hand, there is an urgency about Paul's drive for holiness within congregations and the advance of the gospel across the known world, evidenced by his relentless travelling, his prolific writing and the tone of his letters. On the other hand, "... each one should be careful how he builds"[103] because the building work will be judged from the perspective of eternity[104]. The experience of local church life is but a shadow of the Church's destiny[105], but they are still vitally important, and, indeed, it seems from I Corinthians 3 that Paul expects his work and that of his contemporaries to survive the Day of the Lord[106].

If there is one Church that transcends time and space, and if conventional local churches are provisional, partial and imperfect expressions of that body, other provisional, partial and imperfect expressions of the body may also be possible. I therefore agree with Volf's assertion that the church is "... the anticipation of the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God"[107], although I would argue that the sense of anticipation comes as much from what current expressions of church *do not* currently express of the universal church as from what they do express, and that the Christian joins the rest of the created order in waiting for the complete fulfilment of God's promises[108]. As Rollinson puts it, "The true church is still to come and thus 'is not to be defined by

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[100] Ep 3:6, Co 26-27

[101] Bosch (1991) p151

[102] Cf Volf (1998) p18: "Whether they want to or not, Free Churches often function as 'homogeneous units' specialising in the specific needs of specific social classes and cultural circles... If the Free Churches want to contribute to the salvation of Christendom, they themselves must first be healed."

[103] I Co 3:10

[104] I Co 3:13

[105] I Co 13:8-12

[106] I Cor 3:13

[107] Volf (1998) p128

[108] Ro 8:22

what it is, but by the end to which it moves.'"[109]

Bosch reminds us that Paul developed his missionary theology and strategy in a very specific context[110], and entreats us to "... extrapolate from Paul, to allow him to fertilise our imaginations, and, in dependence on the Holy Spirit, to prolong, in a creative way, the logic of Paul's theology and mission amid circumstances that are in many respects very different to his."[111], in other words "to be faithful to the old text in a new situation"[112]. There is thus a tension between faithfulness and relevance which must be addressed continuously and creatively by *all* expressions of church. And if inclusiveness and the abolition of racial barriers is a New Testament concern, an expression of church that can bring together worshippers from all over the world might have something to offer over conventional local expressions of church.

As in the previous chapter, the above does not constitute a clinching argument in favour of VXC, although it takes us a step further in that direction. The central question is no longer whether or not VXC is a perfect expression of church, but how well it can express church compared with more conventional expressions, and, secondarily, whether it surpasses conventional expressions in certain domains.

Contemporary models of Church

Dulles' seminal "Models of the Church"[113] provides one framework within which to consider different contemporary approaches to expressing church. The "multiple-choice" approach adopted by Dulles has been criticised for diluting the "overall energising effect" of each individual model[114], but it has the merit of teasing out themes that occur under several different historical and denominational banners.

It is not claimed that his five models are exhaustive, or even that they provide the best possible categorisation of approaches, but between them they certainly describe a wide range of church self-understandings. Also, each model is complete within its own terms of reference. This is important,

[109] A. Rollinson, Liberating ecclesiology: setting the church free to live out its missionary nature, (Oxford: Whitley 2005) p10, inner quote from Newbiggin, *The household of God*, p23

[110] Bosch (1991) p170

[111] Bosch (1991) p170

[112] Bosch (1991) p171

[113] Dulles 1984

[114] Rollinson (2005) p6

as comparing VXC with coherent sets of properties is preferable to cherry-picking properties from a range of different models (what Murray describes as "irresponsible eclecticism"[115]).

In January 2005 I posted a brief summary of Dulles five models on the CoF forum, and invited users to vote in a straw poll on the basis of "Which model sounds most like your dream for CoF?". 29 users voted, and many of them also posted an explanation of their reasoning. Although this hardly constitutes a systematic survey, it gives some indication as to how VXC was experienced by its practitioners.

The Church as institution

This model is typified, and maybe most clearly exemplified, by the Roman Catholic church prior to Vatican II. In this model, the church is viewed as a human organisation, which represents God on Earth, in a manner analogous to the embassies of a sovereign state, and which performs certain tasks on behalf of God. Dulles suggests that its three main functions are teaching, sanctifying and governing[116].

Dulles does not try very hard to hide his distaste for the unreformed institutional model. It tends to be clericalist, juridicist and triumphalistic: clericalist because of what Gunton describes as "a tendency to see the clergy as the *real* church"[117]; juridicist because of the place given to imposing church discipline through formal sanctions; triumphalistic because the Church is seen as a conquering army rather than the "little flock" of 1 Peter[118] and Vatican II. Salvation comes through membership of the Church. While this model is historical, which therefore provides continuity with the past, and while it guarantees a strong corporate identity, it lacks a scriptural mandate, downplays the spiritual, does not encourage creative theology and is out of step with the anti-establishment zeitgeist.

Only one CoF user chose the institutional model, and another user commented that CoF would do well to avoid this model. He need not have worried, as it is hard to see how VXC could ever achieve the kind of all-embracing power structures needed for unreformed institutionalism to work.

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115 S. Murray, *Church after Christendom*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster 2004) p109

116 Dulles (1984) p37

117 C. E. Gunton, *The Church on Earth: the roots of community*, in C. E. Gunton and D. W. Hardy, *On being the Church*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1989) p52

118 1 Pe 5:2

It therefore seems that the institutional model is an unpopular and implausible source of inspiration for VXC.

However, before moving on, it did strike me that CoF was often *perceived* as functioning in a way very similar to that described above. A few months after the launch, when the community was functioning without a 3D interface and subsequently attracting less interest, the administrators became concerned that the relatively large group of church wardens[119] was in danger of turning into the "inner circle", their rôle having expanded to discussing and judging the routine behaviour of "normal" users. The forums used by both wardens and the wider user base were restructured to address this concern, and the vast majority of the wardens seemed to accept the changes, but was the dysfunctional group behaviour something akin to virtual clericalism?

I know of very few cases of abuse of power by individual wardens, and they were addressed as soon as they were reported, but those few incidents served as a reminder of the considerable power available to any kind of "superuser[120]" in VXC. Certain policy decisions were considered to be orwellian by some users. Perhaps the biggest public discussion of this issue centred around the discovery that wardens could read all conversations taking place in the Church, even if they were "whispered". This monitoring feature was added to the CoF software because of repeated abuse of the whisper function to harasss other users, typically men whispering obscenities at female avatars. It is common for all conversations to be logged in online communities, but, in the context of a church, this policy caused outrage among many users and some wardens.

The application of sanctions to maintain order in the Church also proved to be a fine balancing act, and the leadership was often accused of heavy-handedness. There was no registration system, and, initially, the mechanism for removing troublemakers[121] was trivial to circumvent, so the system was patched throughout the experiment with a series of techniques for removing chronically abusive users. None of these techniques was ideal, typically letting in some troublemakers while excluding some innocent users. Also, the sheer volume of troublemakers on occasions led to a

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[119] CoF used an anglican visual metaphor, so calling the moderators wardens was a natural choice, although it did create much confusion with non-episcopalian Americans who assumed that the term had something to do with prison warders.

[120] Superuser is the generic computing term for a user who has the power to affect the rights of other users.

[121] Smiting, which was intended to be a joke, but caused less and less mirth as the experiment went on

certain amount of collateral damage. Unjustified exclusion usually provoked fury on the part of the users concerned, and by the end of the experiment a three-person appeals team was in place, their sole job being to reconsider contested smitings, often on the basis of partial and contradictory information. Does this look a little like virtual juridicism?

The initial leadership team was appointed by Simon Jenkins and Steve Goddard, the owners of SoF. In due course they appointed a group of administrators, who took over the responsibility for managing CoF and the wardens on a day to day basis, and for appointing new wardens. CoF, like SoF, is therefore currently a dictatorship, albeit a benign one by most of the users' reckoning, what Volf might call "populist-authoritarian"[122]. Another long public discussion explored alternatives to this situation, and, to summarise, it is far from obvious how to arrive at an elected leadership who can take financial and legal responsibility for the project as a whole when there is no formal membership and no proof of real-life identity. But it is clear that, even if the status quo turns out to be the only option for CoF, it will continue to cause concern in some quarters, perhaps because of its resonance with the institutional model of Church from which at least some CoF users feel alienated in real life.

The Church as mystical communion

In this model, the church is seen as a community rather than an institution. The emphasis is on the quality of interpersonal interaction within small, locally-defined groups. Common metaphors for this form of church, so Dulles, include the family, the household and the neighborhood of pastoral lore. Interaction is intense, intimate and can extend far beyond classically cultic activities: the church functions as church not only when it is gathered, but as believers interact with each other throughout the week. Believers relate as individuals belonging to Christ, and church is an emergent property of those believers' association. For this reason, the biblical term "people of God" is preferred to "body of Christ" because of the latter's connotations of headship. As local church emerges when spirit-filled believers meet, so the wider church is effectively a "community of communities"[123].

This model has several advantages over against the institutional model. It has a more solid

[122] Volf (1998) p12
[123] Dulles (1984) p57

biblical basis, paves the way for ecumenical initiatives, and (for Dulles, who is writing from a catholic perspective) it has some support in catholic tradition and is compatible with Vatican II teaching. The main problem identified with this model is that there is no obvious way to relate the visible and spiritual church, which tends by default to lead to dualism. The local community can come to be viewed as divine in and of itself. Also, the mission of the church is unclear – much consideration is given to *being* church, rather less to what the church should be *doing*.

Fifty percent of votes in the CoF discussion were for the mystical communion model of church. Several of those who voted this way said that they had also been attracted by the servant model of church (and vice versa). The stated reason in each case was that undiluted mystical communion could become rather insular. One user stated "I think what we have is [mystical communion], but my dream for CoF [...] would definitely be [the church as servant]".

Can VXC really be described as "gathered church"? I suspect that the answer has a large subjective element to it. When Nigel Wright states that "Of course, [Mt 18:20] specifically requires a gathering, a coming together of flesh and blood, and it is *hard to imagine* how it is possible to be church without this"[124] (my italics), I wonder whether experience of VXC would be more convincing than careful argument.

Physical proximity obviously does play a part in conventional expressions of church. But it is not *sufficient* to create a gathering: a carriage full of commuters on the London underground is not a gathering in anything other than the most nominal of senses, even if the same people meet up time and time again. Is physical proximity *necessary* for gathered church? It has already been noted that "local" churches are rarely geographically bounded nowadays. Network church – one of the categories of emerging church described in the Anglican report "mission-shaped church"[125] and by Stuart Murray[126] - is characterised by "... a passion to engage with a specific social or cultural context across a wide area."[127]. What members have in common is "... not where they live but who they know and why"[128].

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[124] N. G. Wright, *Free church, free state: the positive Baptist vision*, (Milton Keynes: 2005) p19
[125] Mission-shaped Church pp 62-67
[126] Murray (2004) p81
[127] Mission-shaped Church (2004) p65
[128] Murray (2004) p81

The wider the geographical scope of network church, the greater the rôle virtual means of communication are likely to play, but members of global-scope virtual communities such as SoF do meet physically on occasions. The SoF community tends to involve a high degree of virtual interaction, almost certainly more than in the network churches described by Murray, but the difference is surely one of degree, and the underlying dynamic may be quite similar. In the case of CoF, the 'specific social or cultural context' would probably be the medium itself, ie real-time 3D interaction mediated by the Internet. Calling this a culture makes as much or as little sense as talking about 'club culture'[129], 'café culture' or 'pub culture'.

There is no doubt that it is possible to create tight-knit groups on the Internet, and, with the exception of physical proximity, I would say that CoF has managed to produce something very close to Dulles' description of the mystical communion model on occasions. Indeed, I see the hyper-reality of online relationships as a bigger danger than pseudo-relationships. Because there is less context (which can sometimes mean "distractions"), online discussions can become very intense, especially if they take place in real time, and especially when, as happened during the experiment, there is also a corporate sense of fighting for survival in the face of significant opposition. Significantly, one of the first comments made by Richard Bartle, one of the fathers of virtual worlds and a self-declared atheist, when asked by CoF to act as a consultant to the project, was

> Assuming you don't want to create a cult, it would be best to think right from the beginning of ways to ensure that you don't create one inadvertently. This may also serve to focus your thoughts on what you do want your virtual church to become.[130]

a concern he justified from experience in games-oriented virtual worlds.

It was through the episode that came to be known as "avatar wars" that the CoF leadership came to realise just how intense virtual community can become. At one point, Simon Jenkins upgraded the avatars in the chatroom. It was with hindsight predictable that this change, unannounced, would result in complaints of "who stole my avatar?", but few of us expected the sustained anger on the part of some users who had been deprived of *their* avatar. One user complained that without her avatar she could no longer be herself and no longer be a full part of the community. Offers to

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[129] Murray (2004) p79

[130] Personal correspondance with Richard Bartle by email, 21st January 2005

produce alternative avatars in the house style were not always sufficient to appease these users. Simon explained that if people wanted to take part in an ongoing experiment they really needed to be able to handle change, which set off another round of complaints about the heavy-handed leadership (remember that we are talking about a few poorly-drawn images that on most computers display at about half the size of a postage stamp).

It seems to me that Christian community has to be about more than being: without some sense of moving together towards a destination, there is indeed a danger of church becoming claustrophobic and dysfunctional. If church is conceived wholly in terms of individuals making enormous efforts to live up to some form of social code, "... God's church is reduced to a private club of people who think and behave alike and who are often kept together only through subtle and not-so-subtle forms of manipulation."[131]

While I hope that CoF will not forever be experimental as it was in 2004, the language of pilgrimmage seems entirely appropriate, long term:

> It is not clear that ongoing friendliness in point of fact leads to the most intense experience of God. Christians commonly experience the Church more as a companionship of fellow travellers on the same journey than as a union of lovers dwelling in the same home.[132]

But, to return to the immediate task at hand, it would appear that, for better or worse, VXC can accommodate the features of the mystical communion model of church.

The Church as sacrament

This model brings together aspects of the institutional and mystical communion model, and is to be found in Orthodox and some Roman Catholic theological writing. Church is seen as the place where the divine and the human meet. This occurs through specific sacraments, especially the eucharist, but the church as a whole can be seen as a sacrament, insofar as it is the church's (generally liturgical) activities that bring God and man into authentic and spiritual union. The presence of Christ is mediated by the church, while also creating church.

This model encompasses a range of ecclesiologies which differ markedly in detail, but which have in common a mystical understanding of the meeting of the human and the divine. Thus, for

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[131] Volf (1998) p135

[132] Dulles (1984) p61

example, Ratzinger sees church in "... the communion between the human 'I' and the divine 'Thou' in a universally communal 'We'"[133], this unity being assured through the mediation of priests, bishops and the pope[134], while Zizioulas writes in terms of the triune God, believers and the church attaining personhood by virtue of their relationships to each other, with pre-cognitive love as the dynamo driving the process.

The sacramental model attempts to reconcile tensions that any model must deal with: the relationship between the visible and invisible; human versus divine initiative; being versus doing. On an academic level, it is quite successful (assuming the underlying assumptions are accepted). On the other hand, it lacks explicit biblical support, is therefore generally unpalatable to many protestants, and says little about how the church interacts with the world. Perhaps most damningly in practical terms, it is resistant to vulgarisation[135].

Only one CoF user chose this model, and then proceeded to totally redefine it in the subsequent discussion to exclude God altogether. Whatever the merits of the model as a basis for ecclesiology in general, it is substantively incompatible with VXC. Not only does it presuppose more of the institutional model than VXC can bear, the sacramental model has eucharist at its centre, and the more mystical understandings of eucharist at that.

The Church as herald

According to this model, and in contrast to the sacramental model, it is proclamation of the word that takes centre stage. The church is gathered and formed by the word of God, to which agency is attributed. In other words, it is less a case of using the Bible than of letting the Bible do its creative work. The kerygmatic message is entrusted to the church so that it can be transmitted to others. The rôle of the Bible is therefore primary, compared to the preceding three models. As the church preaches the word of God, it becomes "... a point of encounter with God"[136] for those present.

According to Dulles, this model has many advantages. It is biblical, mission-oriented, recognises God's sovereignty and otherness, and offers a rich understanding of the word of God. On the other

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[133] Volf (1998) p30

[134] Ibid (1998) p59

[135] Eg Dulles (1984) p65: "Man is seen as a polar unity of spirit and flesh" mediated by the body. The essentially sacramental Roman Catholic and Orthodox positions described by Volf are no more amenable to pithy preaching.

[136] Dulles (1984) p77

hand, it is weak on incarnation, tends to stress words over action, and offers no continuity between isolated "word-events" and the ecclesial structures.

This model was chosen by two users, including myself. My background as an open-air preacher no doubt influenced my choice, as the herald model is strong on proclamation and, potentially, evangelism.

Also, it seems to me that this model can in principle survive the journey into cyberspace, and indeed that it describes part of the CoF dynamic. While informal interaction tended to head in the direction of mystical communion, the focus of the experiment was undoubtably the weekly service, and, as the experiment continued, morning and evening prayers (these prayer services often including homiletic content). Organised events tended to be front-led, simply due to the difficulties of managing spontaneity in large groups using the available technology. A short time after the 3D church closed, a group of users announced that they were going to start a Bible study in the chat room, and, once the wardens recovered from the shock of encountering a grassroots initiative, this study was embraced by the leadership and went on to become one of the most enduring features of post-3D CoF community life. At the time of writing there are services in the chatroom most days, led by a team of volunteers, and most cafe usage occurs around these organised events. If the above analysis is correct, it is perhaps surprising that more CoF users did not opt for this model.

The Church as servant

Bonhoeffer summarises this model when he writes that "The church is the church only when it exists for others."[137] Of all Dulles' models, the servant model most clearly articulates the relationship between God, church and the world, and, in contrast to the relationship implicit in the other models, places God in the world, with the church serving the world and shedding light on what God is doing in the world.

The biggest positive feature of this model is that it provides a clear agenda for action in the world. Problems include the lack of a clear scriptural mandate[138] and the possibility of losing the

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[137] Dulles (1984) p94

[138] Dulles (1984) points out that most NT teaching about caring for others is directed to Christians caring for each other, rather than trying to effect social change in the world at large. It has been argued that this is because of the specifics of the NT situation, eg Bosch (1991) p153: "... given the odds against him and the limitations of his situation, it would be totally proposterous for Paul (or any other first-generation Christian, for that matter) to attempt

spiritual dimension of church altogether through excessive activism.

Forty percent of votes on CoF were for the servant model, with many hesitating between the servant and mystical communion options. One user wrote that "[mystical communion] is about what the church is with little reference to what it does. [church as servant] is about what the church does."

To what extent is it possible to serve the world through VXC? There were plenty of examples of users helping each other with problems beyond the virtual walls of CoF. On one occasion I found myself unscrambling a corrupted file containing a warden's coursework, and on another several of us successfully lobbied a housing association in London to fix the central heating of a housebound user. However, both these examples involved caring for those in our community rather than reaching beyond it. One warden sees the solution as mobilising members to make a difference in their own real-life community, for example through donating groceries to organisations working with the poor. Another (potentially risky) route[139] would be to encourage campaigning on specific social issues. But such initiatives are clearly far more limited in scope than what can be attempted, potentially, by a real-life congregation.

Combining the models

To summarise, it seems that the institutional and sacramental models are difficult to apply to VXC, that the mystical communion and herald models are relatively easy to apply, and that the servant model is possibly to apply to a limited extent. Between them, the communion, herald and servant models account for 92% of the votes cast in the CoF straw poll, so the most plausible models also appear to command the most popular support.

The herald and mystical communion models and, to an extent, the servant model are all potentially appealing to protestants, especially those of a free church persuasion. They focus on grassroots rather than hierarchy and are not obviously sacramental. Volf's working definition of church is not dissimilar to the result of combining the herald and mystical communion models:

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to develop a programme of liberation for the entire Empire."

[139] One problem I see here is achieving consensus on how to approach real world issues. On the few occasions that such issues have been raised, the discussion has been extremely lively, often with the two camps on opposite sides of the Atlantic.

> Every congregation that assembles around the one Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord in order to profess faith in him publicly in pluriform fashion, including through baptism and the Lord's Supper, and which is open to all churches of God and to all human beings, is a church in the full sense of the word, since Christ promised to be present in it through his Spirit as the first fruits of the gathering of the whole people of God in the eschatological reign of God.[140]

CoF gathered a congregation. It was trinitarian and christocentric in its theology. It was in every sense a public event, was extremely ecumenical in outlook, and aimed to be welcoming to outsiders. All this favours the conclusion that VXC has the potential to be an authentic expression of church.

The one remaining point of difficulty for VXC with respect to Volf's definition is the absence of the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. While Volf earlier suggests that gathering in the name of Christ is alone sufficient to constitute church[141], his later requirement of the sacraments cannot be dismissed on the grounds of novelty. The Augsburg Confession lists pure Gospel preaching and the correct administration of the sacraments as the two necessary feature of a church[142], a sentiment echoed in Calvin's Institutes:

> Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence.[143]

I do not intend to consider the question of "virtual baptism" here in any detail. To date, no unbaptised user has been converted and then stated that CoF is their "home church", and no believing parents have asked for their children to be christened. In any case, Christians are baptised into the one universal church, so delegating that rite to a physical community seems perfectly reasonable without calling into question the ecclesial validity of CoF. (Indeed, I have seen this practice at work between conventional churches, usually to circumvent political issues surrounding "rebaptism"). By contrast, the expectation of Christians of almost all traditions[144] is that eucharist

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[140] Volf (1998) p158

[141] Volf (1998) p136: "Where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, not only is Christ present among them, but a Christian church is there as well, perhaps a bad church, a church that may transgress against love and truth, but a church nonetheless."

[142] C. Schwöbel, "The creature of the word: recovering the ecclesiology of the reformers", in Gunton and Hardy (1989) p134

[143] Institutio IV.1.9, quoted in Schwöbel (1989) p143

[144] The Salvation Army famously do not celebrate eucharist (and their status as a church is sometimes questioned for that very reason).

will be celebrated on a regular basis in the local fellowship.

We therefore need to turn our attention to the importance and meaning of eucharist[145]. This potentially vast task is rendered more tractable by virtue of having abandoned attempts to make VXC acceptable to those holding an institutional or sacramental view of church (as defined by Dulles). This pretty much excludes Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran approaches to the subject, even before considering transubstantiatory or consubstantiatory understanding of the elements. We will therefore concentrate on what could broadly be called reformed approaches to eucharist

Virtual eucharist?

For all the nuanced interpretations of the Last Supper in diverse strands of Christian tradition, the basic issue with regard to VXC seems fairly clear. The more the New Testament model is seen as prescriptive, and the greater the importance attached to the physicality of the elements, the more difficult it becomes to satisfy concerns about eucharist within VXC. The New Testament is therefor the place to start.

New Testament teaching on the Eucharist

The most obvious proof text for the necessity of eucharist is "Do this in remembrance of me"[146]. A first observation is that this command only appears in Luke and Paul's account, and is absent from Matthew and Mark's account[147]. John does not mention the eucharistic events directly at all. These omissions seem a little surprising[148] if Jesus is instituting a specific rite to be imitated to the letter by all believers.

Closer examination shows that there is significant variation between the presentations of the events that took place in the upper room. The synoptics and John disagree about the date of the meal with respect to the Passover, and therefore on whether or not the meal in question was a

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[145] I use the term 'eucharist' throughout, even though this may imply a particular understanding of the sacrament that is not necessarily intended, to avoid confusion with other uses of 'communion' in this discussion.

[146] Lk 22:19, 1 Co 1:24

[147] See J. Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press 1998) pp58-59 for a helpful presentation of the main texts in parallel.

[148] Kodell (1998) describes this as 'remarkable' (p19)

Passover meal[149]. While some of the accounts place the meal in the context of the Passover, nowhere in the New Testament is the Last Supper interpreted this way[150]. The words pronounced by Jesus vary, both in content and order. There is uncertainty about the number of cups used[151] and about the place of other liturgical elements such as ritual washing. Eleanor Krieder suggests that there were two early church eucharist rites, one involving informal worship and a shared 'agape' meal, the other based on a liturgical celebration of the breaking of bread[152]. As Kodell says of the biblical record, "It is surprising to find that on a matter treated so reverently and carefully [...] there are so many discrepancies among the accounts and so many uncertainties about exactly what it meant."[153] Furthermore, the accounts that we have "... are not complete historical descriptions, but are limited to key elements in stylised form."[154] The original readers swam in the same general cultural stream as the writers, and so there was no need to describe all that happened during a Middle-Eastern meal at the time[155]. By contrast, we have the utmost difficulty reconstructing the assumed background onto which the New Testament writers paint the distinctives of this one particular meal.

Skepticism about the basic historicity of the Last Supper has abated in recent years[156]. However, the variance between the biblical accounts argues against a literalistic understanding of the 'this' the church seeks to honour through its current practices. Just as accounts of the events surrounding the crucifixion vary in detail, and yet the fact of the crucifixion is taken as axiomatic by orthodox Christians, so it would appear that the details of what Jesus did and said in the upper room cannot constitute an article of faith, although the general thrust of his words and actions remain vitally important. As Kodell concludes his book:

> We are not to look to the Bible for a model first-century church to copy... We are to bring the life of Christ and the message of the gospel to new expression in our own day and in our own way,

149 Kodell (1998) p19

150 Kodell (1998) p29

151 Kodell (1998) p20

152 E. Kreider, *Communion shapes character*, (Scottdale: Herald 1997) p40. The agape meal model continued until at least the third century, when Tertullian describes agape meals in Northern Africa

153 Kodell (1998) p19

154 Kodell (1998) p22

155 Kodell (1998) p22

156 "The radical skepticism of scholars early in this century has given way to growing confidence in the historical trustworthiness of the eucharistic institution accounts." (Kodell 1998 p37)

while making sure that our Christian life and eucharistic practice is an authentic development from the original expression.[157]

The quote above begs the other question that needs to be answered regarding the potential scope of 'new expression in our own day and in our own way'.

The meaning of Eucharist

Theologians in the what is now known as the reformed tradition from Wycliffe onwards have rejected the classically Roman Catholic understanding of eucharist, viewing the elements as pointing in some way towards the body and blood of Christ rather than incarnating Christ directly. Wycliffe states that the bread becomes the body of Christ figuratively, just as John the Baptist is becomes Elijah through Christ's words[158]. The analogy is interesting, and suggests quite a low view of the elements. As Wycliffe himself points out, "... Christ does not [...] contradict John the Baptist when he declares, 'I am not Elias'"[159]. Presumably he would therefore expect Christ to contradict the contention that the bread is not his body. The relationship between the seven ears of corn and seven fat cows in the Pharoah's dream and the seven year periods described in Joseph's interpretation are offered by Wycliffe as another example of how the eucharistic elements relate to Christ's body. Bread and wine become body and blood through the faith of the recipient, and, to an extent, through the faithfulness of the host[160].

A document produced in 1395 by the Lollards, and later discussed in parliament, predated Calvin in arguing against the real presence of Christ in the elements because "Christ's body is never out of heaven"[161]. This argument resonates with the presentation above of New Testament teaching on the nature of the church. Just as we cannot fully realise the universal church on Earth - at least not this side of the Eschaton – so we cannot enjoy full table fellowship with Jesus in our current circumstances.

Early reformers, rejecting transubstantiation, view eucharist as looking back to Christ's death rather than forward to his return. "It is a fellowship of our redemption rather than our hope"[162].

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157 Kodell (1998) p131

158 D. B. Knox, *The Lord's supper from Wycliffe to Cranmer*, (Exeter: Paternoster 1983) p14

159 Knox 1983 pp14-15

160 Knox 1983 pp18-19

161 Knox 1983 p22

162 Knox 1983 p36

Fellowship around the Lord's table was a key theme at this time, so Frith's translation of *koinonia* as 'fellowship' in 1 Corinthians 10[163].

Tyndale saw eucharist as a means by which the believer could receive the assurance of forgiveness, but neither baptism nor eucharist were necessary for salvation. It is thus possible to be saved uniquely through the preached word, although the sacraments have been provided "for [God's] glory and our benefit"[164]. Tyndale follows Wycliffe in comparing eucharistic statements with other figurative language in the Bible: Jacob's naming of a place as *Pheniel*, meaning 'God's face', did not in any sense mean that it *was* God's face[165].

Calvin considered baptism and eucharist to be indispensable sacraments, stating that "the name of the body of Jesus Christ is transferred to the bread inasmuch as it is the sacrament and figure of it"[166], but clearly rejected any notion of local presence. Calvin also denied that there was any distance between himself and Zwingli on this issue, a view endorsed by Knox[167].

Taken with the figurative meaning attributed to elements by several reformed writers, it seems clear that, for the reformers, it was the heart attitude of the believer plus the ministry of the Spirit that made eucharist special. So Zwingli: "The true body of Christ is present by the contemplation of faith"[168].

The early Methodists rediscovered the agape love feast, involving a real meal, sharing with the poor, confession, testimony and thanksgiving. Biscuits were sometimes substituted for bread, while the 'wine' was water or, occasionally, tea[169]. This fellowship theme has become more frequently associated with eucharist in recent years, at least partly because of recent scholarly work on the nature of Jewish meals. Table fellowship with Jesus is a repeated theme in the gospels, notably the scandal caused by his habit of keeping company with sinners, and the apocalyptic promise to those who open the door to Jesus is that he and they will eat together.[170]

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163 Knox (1983) p41
164 Knox (1983) p45
165 Knox (1983) p45
166 Knox (1983) p64
167 Knox (1983) p65
168 Krieder (1987) p66
169 Krieder (1987) p79
170 Rv 3:20

The point here is that while there are undoubtably ritual aspects to the Last Supper, table fellowship was a thoroughly enculturated means to express fellowship, and almost a gospel *leitmotif* for the inclusive nature of fellowship with Jesus. For both Jews and Gentiles of the time, formal meals were "... reverenced [...] as an important family and social ritual"[171]. Viewed from this perspective, Jesus largely baptises practices already present in the culture, rather than revealing a brand new mechanism for knowing God.[172] Would the sacraments therefore have taken a different form if Jesus had been operating in a different culture?

Our celebration of eucharist points towards the day when Jesus will also take part in our feast. Jesus' statement, preserved in all three synoptic accounts, that he will not drink of the cup until the Kingdom of God[173] comes shows the eschatological nature of eucharist and the provisional nature of the church's celebrations pending eschatological fulfilment. As with current expressions of local church, the church's expression of eucharist is important because of the "now but also not yet" reality that is the church's destiny, not because the precise form of expression has any mystical power in and of itself.

It therefore seems to me that it would be possible in theory to imagine expressions of church which do not include the specific sacrament of eucharist, providing culturally appropriate means are used to give life to the biblical notions of fellowship, remembrance and anticipation, and that we could claim cautiously that such an approach would not necessarily be in explicit contradiction with at least some historical understandings of eucharist.

The obvious empirical question at this point is whether bread-less quasi-eucharistic practices mediated virtually would "work" on an existential level. The short answer has to be that we do not know, at least on the basis of CoF, because no-one has tried to do so. (One option that has been suggested to me several times in private conversation, namely that each user consumes bread and wine in front of the screen under Internet-mediated direction. This would address the "lack of physical elements" concern, but it seems to me to create several other serious problems. The most serious of these is that the "shared meal-ness" of eucharist, already tenuous in some liturgies, is lost

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171 Kodell (1998) p38

172 It should be noted in passing that Jesus did not 'invent' baptism either.

173 Mt 26:29, Mk 14:25, Lk 22:18

completely. Given the choice of real elements with virtual communion and authentic communion with virtual elements, the second option seems to me to be closer to the essence of the original Last Supper.)

The question of how virtual eucharist would work points to a perspective on VXC that, so far, has not really been explored. The bulk of the discussion has involved listening and responding to concerns about VXC, and to building a theological framework within which VXC can be treated as a valid expression of church. That task is clearly necessary, but it leaves unanswered the question of whether, in practice, VXC does offer anything useful to participants. Before attempting to draw conclusions from the above discussion, we will therefore return to the CoF experiment to see how VXC functioned on a qualitative level.

Ch 5: The culture of virtual Christian community

Christianity and culture

Christianity has always been an indigenized faith[174], in contrast to other world faiths such as Islam which are inextricably tied to a specific language, a specific shrine and a prescriptive social order[175]. The church therefore continually faces the question of how to relate to its host culture. In recent times, the five paradigms described in Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*[176] have largely structured discussion of this area, although Niebuhr has been accused of accepting modernism uncritically, of assuming that change is always incremental, and of failing to address the situation of the church post-Christendom[177]. Niebuhr's preferred model of Christ the transformer of culture is taken up in recent missiological work, notably Wall's Gospel as prisoner and liberator of culture[178].

There is certainly much that could be explored here with respect to VXC, starting with the question of what constitutes the host culture. However, the focus of this chapter is slightly different, looking at CoF *as* a self-contained culture.

The cultural-linguistic approach

This approach to understanding social behaviour has become increasingly popular in the human sciences in recent years[179]. Its most influential exponent within theology is George Lindbeck, notably in his seminal work "The nature of doctrine" (1984).

Lindbeck's primary interest is ecumenism, and he writes from this perspective. He suggests that theologians have historically adopted one of two approaches to doctrine, which he describes as cognitive-propositional and experiential-expressive[180]. The first approach focuses on the truth value of claims made by a group, while the second focuses on the universal core experiences underlying

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174 A. F. Walls, *The missionary movement in Christian history: studies in the transmission of faith*, (New York: Orbis 1996) p7

175 A. F. Walls, *The cross-cultural process in Christian history*, (New York: Orbis 2002) p13

176 H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and culture*, (New York: Harper and Row 1951)

177 L. Sweet (General Ed), *The church in emerging culture: five perspectives*, (El Cajon: EmergentYS 2003) pp 16-17

178 Walls (1996) p3ff

179 G. A. Lindbeck, *The nature of doctrine*, (Louisville: Westminister John Knox Press 1984) p25

180 Lindbeck (1984) p16

religious behaviour,[181]. Both approaches have proved problematic for ecumenical discourse,[182, 183] and the cultural-linguistic approach is proposed as an alternative.

In Lindbeck's framework, religion is viewed as being similar to a community's language and associated culture: "The function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent in this perspective is their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action"[184]. A believer's religion functions as "... the lenses through which human beings see and respond to their changing worlds, or the media through which they formulate their description"[185]. In this view, religion is by definition social, and analysis must focus on the specifics: "One can... no more be religious in general than one can speak language in general"[186]. In contrast to the experiential-expressive approach, inner experiences are inferred from observable behaviour[187]. A Christian is someone who behaves like a Christian in the context of a Christian community[188].

As a framework for understanding VXC, the cultural-linguistic approach has much to offer. For a start, Lindbeck's description of the problems of comparing doctrines from a cognitive-propositional or experiential-expressive perspective sounds similar to typical problems encountered when attempting to discuss virtual Christian community with "outsiders". In some cases, the discussion ends before it starts because of some missing core aspect of "true" Christianity (no sacraments, no physical proximity...). In other cases, the the discussion centres on more existential considerations (whether God can be present, whether a physically dispersed virtual community can be one body...) on the basis of the protagonists' previous experiences, and blocks at the point where opponents of VXC cannot imagine that it would "work" the way its proponents suggest.

Lindbeck's emphasis on acts – and especially corporate acts – rather than on interior states, is

[181] Lindbeck (1984) p31

[182] Lindbeck (1984) pp16-17: "Thus, on this view, doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation is impossible, because there is no significant sense in which the meaning of a doctrine can change while remaining the same."

[183] Lindbeck (1984) p32 "Because this core experience is said to be common to a wide diversity of religions, it is difficult or impossible to specify its distinctive features, and yet unless this is done, the assertion of communality becomes logically and empirically vacuous."

[184] Lindbeck (1984) p18

[185] Lindbeck (1984) p83

[186] Lindbeck (1984) p23

[187] Lindbeck (1984) p34

[188] Lindbeck (1984) p35, original italics

extremely appealing given that there is no practical and reliably way to know what is happening inside the participants in virtual Christian community[189]. Discussion can therefore focus on the observable, rather than on attempts to describe what is "really" happening. In VXC, the system functions as "... the medium though which [believers] formulate their description [of their faith]..." in a quite literal sense. If there is no "genuflect" command, genuflection is not part of the vocabulary that can be used within the community[190]. If, as with the first version of CoF, the dialogue box for typing speech is small, users express themselves in short sentences. If, on the other hand, the system offers a set of religious symbols, users are likely to express themselves through these symbols, whether or not the symbols correlate closely with their preferred flavour of real-world Christianity. Thus CoF users of all ecclesiological persuasions could often be found kneeling, genuflecting and waving their hands in the air, because those were the explicitly religious postures and gestures available.

Church of Fools culture

Church of Fools and Ship of Fools

Before CoF opened, there was some lively discussion on SoF about whether CoF would adopt the same dynamics as the Ship, the consensus being that it would. Three months later, following a decision that initially surprised me, the CoF discussion boards were separated from SoF, to be run under different leadership and with separate membership, following growing frustration on the part of the SoF administrative team and some SoF users at the inability of those joining the community via CoF to fit into the existing ethos of the site. Some of the users whose time within SoF was characterised by repeated clashes with the leadership rapidly found themselves in leadership

[189] I would argue that, here as in many other places, the difference between virtual and real community is smaller than might be imagined. It is clear that being in the same room as someone else gives access to non-verbal communication, and can create a feeling of oneness that is hard to emulate on the Internet, but it is also clear anecdotally that the interpretation of non-verbal signals is far from error-free, and that individuals can fake such signals quite effectively on occasions. The possibility of non-disclosure or deception is more obvious on the Internet, but that does not mean that non-disclosure or deception are necessarily less common in real-life encounters.

[190] In text-only environments, it is common to type descriptions of arbitrary actions. For example, the chatroom of SoF has developed an extended routine around accidental disconnections of users, which the Ship describes as "falling overboard". When people reconnect, they are offered towels, hot drinks and showers, using a simple textual protocol along the lines of *Welcome back User1, <passes User1 towel>*. This form can obviously express a very wide range of actions, eg *<passes into the fourth dimension riding a pink elephant>*. However, in graphical virtual worlds such as Church of Fools, such descriptions are far less common, as they jar with the dominant visual metaphor.

positions in CoF, while some respected members of SoF struggled to find a place in CoF.

The fact that all the original batch of CoF users were longstanding members of SoF, and that most of them are still involved in SoF, did not prevent this divergence. Indeed, early on in the experiment it seemed as if CoF was in danger of defining itself entirely in opposition to SoF. The resulting discussion was strikingly similar to those I have seen within churchplanting projects. The consensus that emerged was that CoF could hardly proceed as if SoF had never happened – after all, SoF was for most of us our main prior experience of VXC, and a generally good experience at that – but that our self-definition needed to be positive rather than reactionary.

Core Values

My expectation from the start of the project was that we would need some form of doctrinal basis in order to do anything together. That CoF has since managed to operate without such a statement, despite bringing together leaders who self-identify variously as evangelical, liberal, anglo-catholic, New Church, Quaker and, in one case "Christian gnostic", is in my opinion one of the clearest signs that the Spirit has been at work.

During the 3D experiment, CoF was an integral part of SoF, and, as such, the Ship's "Ten Commandments" applied (see Appendix 1). Just as most creeds are written in reaction to heresy, these house rules have been refined incrementally as SoF has encountered problems. In other words - as I like to point out on the Ship from time to time – their policy has effectively been drafted by the trolls. One of the Ship admins extended the Ten Commandments to apply to the specifics of the 3D environment. Two of the more controversial clauses outlawed dating and "excessive swearing" in the church.

This approach served us well for the initial three-month period, but, inevitably, each new problem seemed to demand an extension to the list of proscribed behaviour, and the whole system started to feel pharisaical. When CoF moved from under the authority of the SoF admins, we therefore decided to take a fundamentally different approach. Appendix 2 shows the resulting "core values". The aim was to move towards what Murray calls a centred-set definition,[191] rather than attempting to describe the boundaries of the community. Those with experience of enforcing policy

[191] Murray (2004) p26

on SoF argued for the need to address the more common unacceptable behaviour specifically, and the final form of the core values therefore intersperses generic values with a "gloss"[192] of specific applications.

I argued that our core values had to say something about the Christian nature of CoF. In the end, the statement was extremely concise:

> Church of Fools is a Christian church. You are welcome to join us, whatever your beliefs, though you should expect the organised activities to have a Christian emphasis.

The advantage and drawback of this approach was that it enabled each reader to use their own working definition of Christian and church. Subsequent conflicts within the leadership team about the difference between constructive dialogue and harassment of more pious CoF users demonstrated the need for a clearer definition, but there was widespread pessimism regarding the likelihood of reaching any consensus. In the end someone outside the leadership team raised the question on the public discussion boards. I tried to summarise the salient points that were raised, and, after several iterations over a couple of months, the following definition was adopted with the unanimous support of those posting in the discussion:

> God is revealed to seekers by many different means, including creation, the Bible, the life of Jesus and the Spirit-filled witness of the Church. Church of Fools is one expression of that historical, international and universal Church. We aim to create sacred space on the Internet where we can seek God together, enjoy each other's company and reflect God's love for the world. Those of any belief or none are welcome to take part in our activities, providing they accept the Christian focus of our community and respect other participants.[193]

The statement is phrased in positive terms, but is intended to exclude a number of unhelpful emphases, most of which came up in the first few months of the experiment. Participants in CoF are seekers, which says nothing about their position with respect to God but everything about their intended direction of travel. The centre of the community is God, revealed through the major means of revelation generally accepted by Christians. The relative importance of different forms of revelation is deliberately left open, because the aim is to encourage dialogue, not to end the discussion before it starts. Community life centres around worship, fellowship and outreach. Perhaps most originally compared with emerging churches, behaving precedes both belonging and

[192] The admin responsible for this innovation was studying medieval literature at the time.

[193] http://forum.churchoffools.com/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=1516

believing. While some will find this statement underspecified in doctrinal terms, it has the merit of pointing all to Christ, "in a way that does not require the acceptance of ecclesiastical baggage from the past"[194].

Worship, fellowship and personal devotions

The software used for the 3D experiment was produced by a secular company, and the leadership were first able to try it out a week before the official opening. After everyone had explored the two rooms and the various moves, someone suggested that the assembled group should pray, and the prayers that followed seemed far more serious than many expected, given the game-like appearance of the software. Giles Wilson of the BBC experienced something similar during the opening service:

> When Bishop Chartres announces the Lord's Prayer, everyone in the church starts typing it, some in traditional form, some modern, some in French some in Latin. Although it feels slightly daft, suddenly any notion that this is a game is gone. These people are praying together, and that is as real as if they were standing in the same room. That they are in a dozen different towns and countries seems a trifling matter.[195]

The simultaneous typing of the Lord's Prayer became the most stable element of CoF liturgy. The effect is hard to describe on paper. Each user's lines of text scrolled up the screen, in quasi-random order, with different wording and in different languages, with some starting the next line of the prayer before others had finished typing the previous line. The subjective impact of this was to emphasise the sense of a number of individuals praying together.

Another unexpected emergent property of worship within CoF was that it tended to "go high", almost irrespective of the churchmanship of the individuals involved. Thus everyone knelt to pray, and non-conformists who would never consider genuflecting in a physical church were happy to do so in CoF. There are several possible reasons for this. Because of the absence of non-verbal cues such as the evangelical "shuffle chair and breath out to suggest the end of a moment of open prayer", the use of visible cues were a useful way to maintain some semblance of cohesion. The architecture of the building itself certainly suggested an anglican context. The clunkiness[196] of the

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[194] Smith (2003) p130

[195] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/3706897.stm

[196] Used in its technical sense

text interface meant that sermons had to be very short – 300 words was typical – which obviously limited the contribution made by preaching.

But beyond these pragmatic considerations, something more fundamental seemed to be happening. In a discussion among wardens about moving towards first-person rendering,[197] which I had expected to be about technology, but which took a decidedly metaphysical turn, an anglican minister said "I was surprised [...] how much I felt to 'be' my avatar". Others talked about the extent to which they identified with their avatar, and about whether or not this was good. Thus one warden said that we had become "way too avatar-obsessed", while another responded that "Typing the command to cross myself and then seeing myself do it was as *real* and *meaningful* as doing so with my physical hand. I would find losing that immediate feedback of my gestures a real loss." (original emphasis).

Richard Bartle describes the progression made by many users in virtual worlds, from player through avatar and character to persona. Users initially see their avatar as an object, come to consider it as their representative and then come to see it as their representation, "a whole personality that the player dons when they enter the virtual world."[198]. The final step, which Bartle claims is only possible in virtual worlds, is persona:

> Any separate distinction of character is gone – the player *is* the character. You're not rôle-playing a being, you *are* that being; you're not assuming an identity, you *are* that identity; you're not projecting a self, you *are* that self. [...] There's no level of indirection, no filtering, no question: *You are there*.[199] (original italics)

The instinctive reaction of many Christians to the above is to recoil, citing concerns about identity play and consequent loss of integrity. In the first/third person discussion, contributors often seemed surprised by the way they had somehow lost their distance from the CoF environment, and at least some felt that this was a problem that needed remedying.

But is Bartle's description of persona in virtual worlds that shocking? The phenomenon he describes is not rôle play. CoF worshippers played themselves, as Christians, in a church. It is not

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[197] First-person in this context means that the computer screen shows what your avatar sees, rather than a view which includes your avatar.

[198] R. A. Bartle, *Designing virtual worlds*, (Indiana: New Riders 2003) p155

[199] Bartle (2003) p155

clear to me what aspect of this is deceptive. The avatars did not say or do things that were out of character (sic). Hine observes that "... the Internet is only a space for identity play as far as the boundary between online and offline is sustained. If this boundary is broken down, the Internet loses its radical potential."[200] But, as with the Lord's Prayer anecdote, the persona effect defies easy description. So Bartle, *you had to be there*.

While the weekly services and daily prayers always took place within the 3D environment, fellowship tended to spread across media. This is typical of virtual communities, and, incidentally, creates major methodological problems for those wanting to define the boundaries of community communication[201]. Within CoF, options included the 3D environment, the SoF chat room, the various discussion boards, instant messaging tools such as MSN and email. Some of these 'channels' are themselves multichannel: discussions sometimes spanned public and private discussion boards, and it became common practice for wardens to set up an MSN session on which to discuss the best way to handle events within the 3D environment during services. I was not aware of any attempts to arrange physical group meetings during the experiment, but this is probably due to the brevity of the experiment, and a number of 'meets' specific to CoF have been organised subsequently. Informal fellowship was an important feature of CoF, perhaps the most important for many participants.

Some users also found that the 3D environment helped them with personal devotions, to the extent that SoF eventually produced a single-user version of the software at the end of the experiment. Those asking for this software often talked in terms of 'sacred space'. Perhaps the most surprising expression of this concept has come since real-time interaction has moved to a conventional chatroom. A number of rooms have been set up, including a sanctuary, but the only change on moving between rooms is the title at the top of the window. Nevertheless, the community treats the sanctuary in a totally different way to other rooms, and, for some, moving through the rooms has become part of their daily devotional routine, even if they are the only user present. This sense of sacred space, independent of the users present, is another emergent property that was not

[200] Hine (2000) p120

[201] Eg Hine (2000): "However hard the ethnographer tries, she or he will only ever partially experience the Internet" (p63)

predicted at the launch of CoF.

Mission

Many of those involved in the original leadership team signed up because of an interest in mission. As with every other aspect of the project, there was no explicit understanding of what mission might mean in the context of CoF. I initiated a series of discussions on this theme on the public boards, and the general feeling was that the focus should be on welcoming newcomers and engaging honestly with their questions. With my background in proclamation evangelism, I found this somewhat frustrating. However, on reflection, this was probably the best way to proceed, at least during the experiment. Apart from anything else, high-profile coverage of CoF in the secular media resulted in a constant stream of newcomers that the core community struggled to accommodate because of their sheer number. If this 'newbie hose'[202] continues to operate long term, the best evangelistic strategy may be to continue to try to do right by those who walk through the door. That strategy is not without biblical support: "In the New Testament there is simply no distinction between worship and mission [...] since the objective of the witness of the church in the world is that all peoples should be brought to share in the privilege and joy of worshipping the living God"[203]. Evangelism through worshipping together and leaving the door open could be seen here to result in what Nigel Wright calls "gathering-in church"[204]

Commitment

A final area that deserves comment is the level of commitment shown by many of those in leadership roles. Most of the team were church leaders first, with little or no prior experience of virtual worlds, and limited interest in the technology *per se*. Many had significant family, professional and local church commitments. Nevertheless, my most enduring impression of the experiment, a year after it ended, is the way so many people gave sacrificially of their time and energy.

The constant and sometimes almost overwhelming stream of trolls attracted by the project was especially hard to handle because of time differences. The majority of wardens were in Europe,

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[202] Bartle (2003) p142
[203] Smith (2003) p113
[204] Wright (2005) p51

with a smaller number in the Americas and very few in Australasia, but the majority of trolls were based in America, and turned up in their late evening. This meant that Europeans were working in their small hours, that even the Americans were working well into the night, and that the few wardens in Australia and New Zealand were sometimes on their own. Some wardens made a difficult situation harder for themselves in operational terms because of a deeply held conviction that banning anyone from church was wrong in principle. This ruled out any of the more radical means of excluding users, and left them with a 'smite' button that was fiddly to use and, in the worst case, removed troublemakers for only a few seconds. I remember one American mother describing how she had stood by the door of the church, alone, for three hours, removing trolls one by one, until they eventually gave up for the night, because she was not willing to let them spoil 'our church' or to simply close the doors.

Wardens frequently spoke of how they could not continue to spend so much time in CoF, before continuing or increasing their commitment for weeks and months. One consideration when closing the experiment was that it seemed irresponsible to continue to ask individuals to give so much of themselves with inadequate technical backup. However, this in no way detracts from the sacrificial commitment shown by the leadership team, which could be considered to be one of the signs of authentic *church* leadership, and counters Postman's complaint that Internet communities lack any sense of 'mutual obligation'[205].

Reflections on church-as-culture

If we were to attempt to flesh out a cultural-linguistic model of VXC above areas of core values, worship, fellowship, mission and sacrificial leadership would be some of the major entities. The aim would be to look at how these entities function with respect to each other, and, eventually, to compare the resulting 'grammar of church' with that of other expressions of church. Thus, for example, the core values would be examined to determine what they *do* within the community, rather than what they say, and how that statement affects the way worship, mission and other entities function.

A list of entities that do not figure in the above description, but which might play a key rôle in

[205] In Pullinger (2001) p73

other expressions of church, include the sacraments, social action, catechism and any recognition of Christian family life (or the place of children for that matter). It would also be interesting to use such an approach to compare VXC with other expressions of online community, and thus to see how the dual ancestry of VXC is resolved in practice.

What the cultural-linguistic approach (at least Lindbeck's version) cannot do is make value judgements about the orthodoxy of any expression, especially if it is accepted that no expression can be considered to be normative in an absolute sense. It is more ethnographical than ethnological[206]. But as a tool to encourage self-understanding it would appear to have much to offer. It could also facilitate dialogue between those committed to different expressions of church - this, after all, was Lindbeck's original intention. "Those who seek the kingdom find it where they are, and they stand in very different places, their perceptions and relationships formed by different histories."[207] Any methodology that enables others to understand not only where a community stands but how it moves and acts is likely to contribute to comprehension beyond the community's boundaries.

[206] Cf Hakken (1998) p3
[207] Walls (2002) p15

Ch 6: Conclusions

The way in which CoF was launched with little or no explicit theological reflection is typical of the way non-commercial web-based projects start. Because the technology allows rapid and relatively cheap development and continuous change, and because Internet culture is still evolving faster than published studies, the tendency is to proceed empirically and iteratively.[208] This approach has much to commend it, and I do not think that SoF could have built a theological model of VXC in abstract even if the desire to do so had existed. To describe CoF as a Cornelius experience would be going too far - unlike Peter, SoF set out to create a new situation, and there was no status quo within SoF to compare with the position of the Jerusalem church. Indeed, it could be argued that the discovery that unrest is not a sufficiently broad creed on which to found a church, and that an agreed status quo is necessary, was the most radical break with SoF orthodoxy. Nevertheless, those committed to the future development of CoF now find themselves wrestling with issues that emerged from the experiment, and which were not fully identified *a priori*.

Murray states that "Theological timidity may be more dangerous than heterodoxy to emerging churches."[209] While VXC seeks continuity with historical expressions of Christianity, the context is in some senses radically different to that of physical churches, including most emerging churches. Existing ecclesiologies are therefore likely to need tailoring - at the very least - to provide the theological undergirding[210] required in the long term by any expression of church.

What might a theology of VXC look like? On the basis of the arguments presented here, I would propose the following list of elements:

- Recognition of virtually-mediated interaction is a legitimate basis for Christian fellowship.
- Recognition that the lives of those interacting span the virtual and the real, and that proximate physical interaction, where feasible, can also play a positive rôle in VXC.
- Celebration of the worldwide character of the contemporary church

[208] The growth of the SoF community is an example of this paradigm: the community started using very basic forum software, was almost destroyed by a particularly insistent troll, and this resulted in fundamental changes in both software and policy. Similarly, the financial model has moved from donations to subscriptions and back as circumstances have changed.

[209] Murray (2004) p94

[210] Murray (2004) p94

- Recognition that all expressions of church, including VXC, are the first-fruits of the universal church that Christ will one day gather, and that VXC is therefore a provisional, partial and imperfect expression of church that nevertheless points to that eschatological destiny.
- A focus on fellowship, corporate worship and proclamation within a centred-set public community gathered around a christological centre.
- Acceptance that the scope for *corporate* expressions of servanthood is limited, that the onus is therefore on members to serve as individuals, and that CoF should seize what corporate opportunities to serve do exist - especially in the immediate neighbourhood of the Internet.
- A figurative understanding of the sacraments, notably eucharist, which allows corporate expression of belonging, fellowship, rememberance and anticipation through sacramental practices that can be expressed satisfactorily in virtuality.
- Leadership structures which emphasise accountability and service rather than hierarchy, insofar as this is possible within the wider legal and financial context of the Internet
- Commitment to development of a church culture that expresses continuity with historical Christianity, compatibility with broad Internet culture, but which incarnates the gospel in distinctive and prophetic ways

The most contentious element is almost certainly the radical approach to the eucharist. I would argue that this is no more dramatic than paradigm shifts at other points in church history, but it must be acknowledged that the sacraments of baptism and eucharist have survived all these shifts, albeit in a wide variety of forms. However, I do not think that proponents of VXC can skirt around the issue of the sacraments if they wish their claim be a church to be taken seriously.

The experiment touches on issues affecting more conventional expressions of church. For how long can church leaders continue to speak and act as if their congregation live in the proximate community of pastoral folklore when, increasingly, their social networks have little or no geographical basis? As globalisation continues, the centre of gravity church shifts to the developing world, travel becomes cheaper and the Internet continues to make the world feel smaller (with or without VXC), how will local churches express the universal dimension of their eschatological hope? Perhaps experiments in VXC could act as "... burning bushes in unlikely places in our

postmodern culture ..."[211] for the church as a whole, just as VXC must continue to learn from other expressions of church.

CoF is likely to be characterised by ongoing change for the foreseeable future. A completely revised second version of the software has just been commissioned, and the reopening of the 3D environment will doubtless confront the leadership team with new questions and challenges. Hakken concludes his book on the future of the Internet with the observation that "... cyberspace must be imagined actively"[212]. My hope is that the undoubtedly active imaginations of the CoF team will be inspired by bold theological reflection of the type Murray recommends.

[211] Smith (2003) p12

[212] Hakken (1998) p228

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Appendix 1: Ship of Fools "Ten Commandments"

Someone said a long time ago: "Love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself." If you stick to this fairly basic principle, you won't go far wrong here. However, just in case, here are the 10 Commandments of the Ship of Fools bulletin boards, available in easy-to-swallow tablets. Please note that these rules also apply to your user profile and to private messages.

1. Don't be a jerk

Lively, intelligent discussion is what we're about. Jerkish behavior includes (but is not limited to): racism, sexism and all the other negative -isms, trolling and flame-baiting.

2. Engage brain before posting your message

Read the words you've written before you post them. Once they're out there, you can't take them back.

3. Attack the issue, not the person

Name-calling and personal insults are only allowed in Hell. Attacks outside of Hell are grounds for suspension or banning.

4. If you must get personal, take it to Hell

If you get into a personality conflict with other shipmates, you have two simple choices: end the argument or take it to Hell.

5. Don't easily offend, don't be easily offended

Disagreement is normal here. Try not to nurse hurt feelings, and, conversely, if you know you've stuffed it up, cop to it without excuse. We've all had to at some point.

6. Respect the hosts

The hosts are here to encourage discussion, field questions, prune threads, and settle minor disputes. They have the final word, and what they say goes. If you disagree with a ruling, raise the issue in the Styx, our board for in-house stuff.

7. Don't post illegal material

Posting libellous material, copyright violations or links to sites advocating illegal activities puts us in legal hot water, which makes us very unhappy.

8. Don't crusade

Don't use these boards to promote personal crusades. This space is not here for people to pursue specific agendas and win converts.

9. Don't advertise or spam

Don't use these boards to advertise your site or product, or to lift email addresses to spam our members.

10. Only one identity per member

We do not allow sockpuppets (multiple usernames). Outside of confusing everyone else, people who talk to themselves in this way are just too weird for words.

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Please read the FAQ pages for information about the administrators, hosts and the way the boards operate. Your comments and suggestions on these house rules are welcome – simply post your ideas on our permanent 10 Commandments thread on the Styx.

Appendix 2: Original Church of Fools "core values"

Church of Fools is a Christian church. You are welcome to join us, whatever your beliefs, though you should expect the organised activities to have a Christian emphasis.

Church of Fools values:

Respect: You have a right to your opinions. You do not have to reveal more of yourself than you wish. You can decide if and when you want to end any conversation. You should not have to be exposed to gratuitous swearing or other aggressive behaviour. Please treat other users with the same respect

Don't reveal another user's identity. People are comfortable here saying what they actually think, as opposed to what they know their bosses, etc. want to hear. We want to keep it that way.

Tolerance and diversity: People come here from all sorts of backgrounds and church traditions, and may therefore express themselves in different ways to you. We see that as a positive thing.

Being aggressively provocative or deliberately disrespectful don't promote tolerance and diversity and homophobic comments, racism, sexism or whateverism are not acceptable.

Don't get personal. If you want to say someone's ideas are wrong, that is fine. If you call them names or describe them in an insulting way, you are personally attacking them, which is not allowed.

Constructive dialogue: Our bulletin boards are a better medium for serious and detailed discussion than the Café or Church, so do make use of them.

Don't expect everyone to think the same as you. The assimilation of everyone to your personal belief set isn't a great aim for conversation.

Don't have personal arguments on the boards. If your disagreement is no longer about the subject under discussion and has started to get personal, we expect you to stop or to only continue the disagreement by private exchange

Personal reflection and corporate worship: Please don't behave in a way that would disrupt either.

This means that you do not make gestures or remarks of an obscene or sexual nature. You should not confuse the Church, the boards or the Cafe with a singles bar.

Responsibility: Church of Fools is staffed by volunteer admins, wardens and hosts who give freely of their time to enable this space to be open to the public. Please help them to do their job by complying with their requests or instructions.

If you are being told to do or not do something by an admin, host or warden they will indicate this with a comment such as [admin comment] or [host hat on]. Ignoring a direct instruction is not wise.

Accountability: If you are concerned about any aspect of the way the space is run, we would encourage you to raise the matter with one of the administrators, or on the "Pulpit" forum. Please note that we will not discuss specific instances of "smiting" or banning in public.

In using Church of Fools (including its bulletin boards and cafe) you agree:

Not to post illegal or 'adult' material: Don't post - or link to - porn or adult content. Any such material should be at least '2 clicks' away from our website. If you post libellous material, copyright violations or links to sites advocating illegal activities you may put us in legal hot water. Do not do this.

Not to advertise: Don't use the church to advertise another website or product, either in conversation or the name you choose for yourself. Linking to your own website in your bulletin board profile or through a discreet link in your sig is acceptable. If you wish to explore how you can advertise through our website, please contact our editor simon@shipoffools.com.

Not to have multiple identities. You may only have one user name on Church of Fools. If you desperately need to change your identity for a good reason, plead your case privately to an admin.