

Virtual Church: Emerging patterns of church

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We live in a time of profound transition in society, no less in the church. The word crisis is perhaps overused but it is not inappropriate when thinking about the church. The word usually carries negative connotations but shouldn't in the church.

I don't want to underestimate how difficult such times are, but from the perspective of faith, crises, historically have been opportunities for God to intrude into the life of the church in new and fresh ways. Break open the concrete. The central Christian story is in fact one about death and resurrection. Sometimes the old must pass away in order that the new may emerge.

Patterns of church life constantly evolve in time and space. So Christians with any sense of history, or any sense of the broad cultural diversity in the contemporary church, should have a built in hermeneutic of suspicion about absolutising any particular forms of worship or church order.

HOWEVER – and, perhaps ironically, this is the countercultural position today in a way it was not thirty years ago – appropriate weight needs to be given to 2000 years of wisdom about what constitute fundamental marks of the church.

So the whole question of new and emerging patterns of church, including the impact of new technologies, pushes us immediately into fundamental questions of theology and ecclesiology.

The classic Reformed definition I was raised with: the true church exists where the word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly celebrated. How many sacraments is a point of difference between various Christian communions! Catholics and others include in their definition a particular form of church structure, relationship with the Bishop of Rome etc. Recently read John Douglas Hall arguing, biblically and theologically, that an essential mark of the church, obscured in a period of protracted ascendancy and its accompanying theological triumphalism, is **suffering**.

Paul Minear wrote a classic study, 'Images of the Church in the New Testament'. From memory he identified 80. That alone is a caution against absolutising any one model or metaphor! Most Christians are familiar with some of these images: salt, light, ark, sojourner. But his study led him to conclude that the four most dominant images of the church are the people of God, the new creation, the fellowship in faith, and the body of Christ.

The people of God: this is the most basic definition of the ecclesia – all the saints in Christ Jesus. God creates, calls, sustains and saves the church. This is a people with a past, a present and a future. It is a pilgrim people. The future towards which the church travels is the new heaven and a new earth. This people is chosen to be a concrete manifestation of God, God's incarnational presence and activity in history.

The new creation: ‘Therefore if any one is in Christ, they are a new creation’ (2 Cor 5). This new creation is the context in which our journey of faith takes place. The fellowship of the community nurtures and forms our pilgrimage.

The fellowship in faith: emphasises the divine presence taking form in a new fabric of human relationships – a fellowship of redeemed sinners. Living together was not in the early church, and is not today, easy. Modern individualism struggles with this.

The body of Christ: a physical body of people who are a continuation of the presence of Christ in the world. This incarnational motif regulated the early Christian perception of the church.

So let me express some concerns about various meanings suggested by virtual church. And I’ll do it by suggesting three fundamental characteristics of a church that values grounding its understanding in scripture and our theological heritage.

1. Christianity is a fundamentally *incarnational* faith.

That is, it is enfleshed, embodied. It is carnal, not virtual. The church is the continuation of the incarnation, it is the body of Christ, the place where the ‘other’ is made ‘near’. Because Christ is inextricably linked with the church, it is, in Hauerwas’ words ‘a community of character’. This community of character is the context in which our spirituality is formed. This is behind Cyprian’s famous saying, ‘You cannot have God as your Father without the Church as your Mother’. Our life ‘in Christ’ is a process that takes place within his body in transactional relationship with each other.

That is, God relates to people concretely, personally, historically. Almost by definition, this excludes virtual relationship. Christ is an **incarnate** saviour, not a **virtual** saviour. Christ became flesh and lived among us. The virtuals of the early church were called docetists. Christ’s humanity was virtual or unimportant. It was considered, if not unchristian, then at least sub-Christian. Brian Wren: ‘Good is the flesh that the Word has become’.

2. Christianity is fundamentally *communal*.

Jesus’ call was not addressed primarily to individuals because it is as individuals that human beings are least able to respond to Jesus’—and God’s—invitation. Jesus’ call is for the formation of nonviolent communities—churches—in which we humans have our best hope of attaining the goal of friendship with, and likeness to, God. Hauerwas and Willimon distinguish Christian community from communities that form for reasons other than living a life that grows out of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. They note that in modern Western culture, there is a hunger for meaning that the culture, with its emphasis on individualism and detachment from long-term commitments, does not provide. People will be attracted to communities that provide a way out of loneliness based on common interests, racial or ethnic makeup, or mutual self-interest, but these are not communities that move us toward more authentic lives.

Western culture has encouraged an ethic of the isolated individual that elevates the value of a person who can stand, choose, and act alone. Christian ethics elevates above all else the value of being faithful to Jesus. This faithfulness can only be

pursued in a community of believers who seek to discipline their wants and needs in the quest for truer lives. Togetherness is a by-product, not the goal, of such believing communities, but life together in such communities is essential, not optional, for those who would be Christians.

We need to acknowledge that people gather as community in different ways, and that virtual communities are an emerging form. The question is, whether they can replace gathered incarnational community. If we decide they cannot replace incarnational communities then are there ways in which they open up possibilities to supplement, and enrich people's experience of church. Here I would hope the church can be open-minded, experimental and adventurous.

Remember we are talking about norms here. Clearly for people unable to gather e.g. disabled, isolated, etc, then virtual communities may be a great blessing. Some churches have, for example, had very effective tape ministries. That is, not only have church services been recorded, there is supplementary ministry attached. The wider community is explicitly acknowledged and prayed for, tapes are delivered, communion offered along with pastoral ministry. I have known many Christians too aged or infirm to be able to physically attend worship for whom the services on TV, Songs of Praise etc, have become *de facto* church. In their lounge room or hospital room they sense they are part of the worship of God with other people. A friend of mine is a Chaplain in a large hospital. When he leads worship in the hospital chapel he may or may not have real human company. He conducts the service into a camera, and monitors in wards gather the people together for the worship of God.

But somewhere, there needs to be community. Why? Because God, according to the Christian understanding, within Godself, is community – a community of love between the persons of the trinity, reaching out beyond Godself because love can do no other, and inviting creation's participation in what the New Testament calls *perichoresis* – mutual indwelling.

Human beings, scripture teaches, made in the image of God, are therefore social, communal, relational creatures. We are not, contrary to other narratives, autonomous, self-defining creatures but we discover ourselves, we learn our true identity in relationship, in communion - with God and with other people.

In community we practice the disciplines of faith – reconciliation, sharing of life and goods, hospitality, service, justice-seeking. However, I certainly take seriously the testimony of friends and acquaintances for whom the internet has opened up new possibilities for community, and even for worship.

3. Christianity is *sacramental*

Like Judaism Christianity is a materialistic religion. It does not despise matter (also the incarnational principal). Some manifestations of Christianity have actually perpetuated the body/spirit split and concluded with the Gnostics of old that since matter is only matter it doesn't matter! However the wisdom of the church identified this quite early as a sub Christian understanding. (I prefer such language to the language of un-Christian or heresy as the Christian tradition in its breadth carries within it a number of different perspectives on the big questions). Baptism, eucharist

etc require a gathering. Baptism is a rite of entry into a community – a rite of ‘mutual obligation’. It doesn’t make any sense apart from as a corporate act. A virtual sacrament is a contradiction in terms. Holy Communion is the family meal of the church. With all its symbolic overlays and underpinnings, it replicates real meals. A particular Passover meal, the actual meals of Jesus during his ministry, meals where the Reign of God was palpably expressed, the meals of the Risen Lord on beaches and in homes. Private eucharists make no sense historically, anthropologically and certainly not theologically.

Let me ground this conversation in the congregation in which I most recently ministered. A lively congregation which had experienced sustained numerical growth over a period of years. I also had another congregation which, although it had the same minister, the same liturgical structure, same sermon etc, had experienced a sustained period of decline. The difference lay largely in the expectations that each brought to the church. In a careful study of the congregations I wanted to discover the culture of the growing congregation.

What sort of aspirations did this group bring, or more accurately, work out on the way?

- They valued **participation** very highly. If these young people were going to be part of the church it was not going to be a passive thing.
- They wanted a church that would be a **community** in a deeper sense than their previous experience of church. They wanted to be real with God and each other. They were impatient with pretence and shallowness in the Christian life.
- They wanted a church that was **inclusive and welcoming** of all people in the Spirit of Jesus.

These qualities or characteristics seem almost the opposite of ‘virtual’. Virtual communities provide safe refuge for those who want to say ‘I love people in general, I just don’t like them in particular’.

Our current model of church has produced a community with low levels of biblical and theological illiteracy, little grounding in the classic spiritual disciplines, sporadic missional engagement and superficial experience of community. So in raising questions about virtual church or other emerging models I am in no way defending the status quo which, for many people, is patently not doing the job.

The times call for renewed attention to identifying the core functions of the church and through faithful imagination and experimentation, explore appropriate ways of building community around the memory, dream and presence of Jesus.

Almost all of the critique or cautions I have raised about virtual church are also challenges to contemporary conventional church.

Let me conclude this by reading a reflection I wrote following worship a few weeks ago when the theme of this conference was in the back of my mind.

At my local church, on any given Sunday morning, I see the young and the old, I see the fitness freak yuppy and I see 'Andy' teetering on his walking sticks making his precarious way down the sloped aisle to the prayer candle. I see the pious and the profane, the seeming-altogether-types, the manifestly disturbed and those hanging-in-there-by-the-toenails.

I like the way the Bible is held aloft and carried like a precious thing into our weird gathering to signal the start of worship. We stand as a mark of respect for the ancient wisdom that gathers us as community and calls us to live in the stream of Gods justice and mercy.

I like it when people are baptized, water is sloshed, the baby cries (that baby always cries!). Sometimes the Minister gets carried away with a bunch of wattle leaves and splashes the congregation with the water. The children's longing to be in the firing line is transparent. I am surprised by the ferocity of my intercession. Splash me, Rev, splash me too! I like marking my forehead with the sign of the cross with which this person, and I, many years ago, was washed into God's big dream for creation.

I like it when Mary interjects loudly during the service, sometimes inappropriately, sometimes with a word or noise that seems straight from God.

I like the noise of the children. I like the bands that lead the music – seasoned performers matched with young ones learning the craft of praise. I love it when the pipe organ gets its occasional chance and, like a race horse released from its cage, lets it rip and young and old unite in praise that has stood the test of time.

I like how in this grand, old, cold building, the pew sheet suggests that until decent heaters are installed, the wearing of beanies may enhance the experience of worship through the winter months.

I like how the bible passage is explored first with the children and then with those of us who inhabit God's dream with more difficulty. We attend to the reading and the reflection upon it with rare attention. We do not live by bread alone and we all know it.

At the passing of the peace we all mutter an ancient greeting. The preacher reminds us we are not saying 'g'day, wasn't the footy great yesterday?' We are reminding one another that, whether we feel it or not, we are wrapped in a mantle of peace and grace not of our own making.

I like the solemnity that descends and adds depths to the joy of the feast when the Minister intones the ancient words 'The body of Christ....the blood of Christ...for you'.

I like to surreptitiously read the faces, as open and empty hands reach out for the bread of today and the wine of tomorrow.

I like the way the kids come along behind the Minister in this circle of communion, carrying the wicker baskets to collect our empty glasses, trying desperately, and unsuccessfully, to look appropriately solemn. I like the little clink of the glasses as they land.

I like the blessing at the end of the service. I feel like I have been given a cloak of grace to wear through the week.

I like being sent out with everybody else to serve the world God loves, joyfully, not dutifully. I especially like the way the smell of plunger coffee has been wafting into the worship space towards the end of the service and the communion of good coffee and chat bridges between one dimension of worship into the worship we are called to express in the banality and glory of everyday life.

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