

Exploring “virtual connection” and ‘relationships’.

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Without doubt, we are in a time of transition from a society which has prioritised and valorised the physical, the carbon-addicted society of urban and industrial proliferation, to a society, which will have to focus much more on the role of ecology and the increasing importance of the digital. For now, our world is ravaged by climate change and pandemic, a time of dissociation and panic where the transition can easily seem so much harder to bear. We want stability when all around us there is nothing but change.

Twenty years ago, Barry Wellman wrote up the development of networked society ... More recently ethnographers like Christine Hine and theologians like Angela Gorrell have reminded us that today’s internet society is “embedded, embodied, and everyday”:

- **embedded** in the technology in our houses, offices, cars and streets, in shopping malls and supermarkets, in newsrooms and churches and embedded increasingly in our own bodies;
- **embodied** in the myriad ways physical human beings interact through pluriform platforms and modes – sound, photography, video, gaming, creativity and worship – but embodied also in facilitating and organising social action – foodbanks, COVID19 support, phone line support for the shielding and campaigning on mental health, equality, free school meals and so on; and
- **everyday** in that we live in an increasingly 24/7 global world where social media becomes the background noise, the radio, through which we hear others’ voices, filtering out the strident voices of hate and filtering in the oft forgotten voices of the disabled, the poor, voices of colour – that neglected global majority of voices, the weak, the housebound, the elderly, the vulnerable.

Bex Lewis is a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University. She is living with incurable stage 4 metastatic cancer. Bex is an extrovert and an avid user of social media. She has made the transfer across to being a networked individual. Her world is online – from her “waiting room feet” posts, her advice on how to speak to people with cancer, her facebook posts exploring her own funeral, pictures of her enjoying wild swimming with her friends. Bex’s life is embedded, embodied and everyday. But Bex would be the very first person to say that in no way has it altered who she is as a relational human being. She is present to her networks and they are very present to her.

Relationality and relationships are part and parcel of a connected, networked world. Those relationships within many churches have been built up over this most difficult of years through online church, through zoom coffee meetings, and bible studies. Up and down the land, more people have engaged in faith-related discipleship **online** from morning prayer to bible studies and alpha, to prayer courses and helping out at foodbanks or working with the COVID19 support groups. Our research at Durham with Sevanta ComRes suggests a further 12 million people engaged in faith-related activities over this summer alone. Online, offline, physical, digital – the church continues and the church community grows.

But is there a theological issue with relationships that go beyond the physical? Bex and our joint friend, Joanne Cox-Darling led a session at last year’s premier digital conference which explored how digital community exposes a God who calls us to campaign, collaborate, and care.

The Church has to believe in a mixed economy where both physical and digital are part and parcel of each other - the wholeness of our humanity – spiritual, emotional, mental and physical – the wonder that is the human being – is surely more than physical, and yet, even when online, always anchored in the physical – we cannot escape our flesh. And this changes our theology.

When we were writing the book on Fresh Expressions and the Mission of the Church, Loveday Alexander reminded us that the Church too has always expressed both **intensive** local, physical, relations and **extensive** remote, non-physical, relations. So, when Paul was writing to the Corinthians of the body of Christ – he was speaking to the Corinthians church and its various factions but also to the wider church. When the apostles came to Antioch or sought to correct the Galatians, they were engaging the local church because the church is always more than the local. The local physical expression of church only has ecclesial density because it is part of the wider extensive universal church. As Paul Avis reminded us when I was Faith and Order Secretary for the Methodist Church, our ecclesiology is built on a eucharistic community centred on the bishop. To some extent that community is a *virtual* community, a gathered community, a distanced community.

We too like the Corinthians are called to acknowledge at the breaking of bread not just the local body but the *universal* body of Christ. There, at the Eucharist, all heaven and earth, all time and space is focussed in the celebration and remembrance of Jesus' self-giving act of grace on the cross. Here the angels in heaven, the church triumphant and the church militant and the church to come, and all creation gaze in wonder as bread is broken and wine poured out. Here Paul reminds us that we, the body, transcend ourselves and need to recognise the body of Christ for the transtemporal, transphysical, transdimensional reality that it is.

Sadly there is no time to explore how the Church has for the last 2,000 years explored those relationships which transcend the physical, of an extensive church which is the body of Christ, of the pan-dimensional vine dressed by a God who is spirit, of a God who is in all, though all and over all; of our own calling to be resident aliens (1 Peter 2:11) – *paroikoi* – those who dwell in the city among others but maintain an alternative identity, part of culture but also part of a more extensive existence – citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20), ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20).

What I am trying to say here is that the church is no stranger to virtual connection. No relationship that human beings at either end can ever be said to be virtual because the human beings are always physical, always enfleshed, always real. As such, those connections in digital space are real and those relationships are real. Nancy Baym's *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* is a great place to reflect further.

In her book on social connection, *Connected toward Communion*, Catholic theologian Daniella Zsupan-Jerome highlights the new cultural milieu, the strange new world into which we are called to immerse ourselves in order to connect and communicate with its citizens. She repeatedly reminds us that we are surrounded by Church Triumphant, the Cloud of Witnesses, the Saints and Martyrs who guide us forward and shape our communication. She constantly pulls us from seeing the connectivity of the world as an idol of digital frenzy, to an icon of spiritual connection – reminiscent of the iconology of Louis Chauvet, Jean Luc Marion and, of course, Rowan Williams. This new culture, she argues, is marked out not by isolation but by *social connection*, by

conversation and playfulness, by friendship, sharing and following – hints perhaps of a network identity known to us in the true relationality of participation in God, in Christ, and our identity *in imago trinitatis*.

But also a network identity which doesn't privilege the healthy, the wealthy, the physically abled. One thing that the new digital culture has reminded us of is the accessibility of the digital. A church for the disabled and the vulnerable has been active online for decades. Now we find an online hybrid church which has the potential to include so many – the housebound, the vulnerable, the scared, the disabled, the mentally frail. People write in thanking churches for providing a sofa behind the back pew where they can engage in church and get to know what's going on. We need to build true encounters with and for all the body, all those who come to encounter God, both online and offline. We need to build encounters in which we show compassion and love for all people – loving, caring, embracing, feeding, sharing God, sharing bread and wine.

Professor Deanna Thompson, a Lutheran theologian based at St Olaf College, Minnesota has stage 4 terminal cancer. She wrote her book "The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World" to give testimony of the powerful pastoral support she found online during her illness – she talks of it as a caring bridge, of being surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, of feeling she was part of praying, healing, loving community in the very times when she could no longer be physically present with them.

But as Pope Francis said in his 2014 World Communications Day message – digital can be seen as detached – like the passers-by in the Parable of the Good Samaritan – although to be fair that can be the experience of physical church as well. Francis argued that we need to build true encounters like the Samaritan, in which we show compassion and love for the all people – washing, embracing, feeding, sharing together at the table. The pandemic has shown us the need for interpersonal interaction and the horrors of a non-touching society, the horrors of people dying without their loved ones present. Does this suggest that digital is never enough for we fleshy beings? Or perhaps not yet? We need to be careful of the language we use – digital is rarely virtual – in discussion of hybrid church it is always physical since I am here and you are there – we are still enfleshed, our relationship is still real, just more distanced. We need to see online church as a real mission field rather than passing it off as a stop gap during a pandemic. Perhaps our indifference to digital is what makes it appear to be less than real, less than it could be.

The pandemic and its lockdowns will hopefully not be with us forever, although the virus probably will. But how do we take the best of both worlds and learn to live in a hybrid digital space which enhances our relationships, draws us closer to God and one another, and which can be seen as a place where the church flourishes.

As in our own personal lives, relationships are about our own interaction with the world around us. We need to reach out into the new networked society and pioneer new mission fields – to build caring bridges, sacramental bridges, missional bridges across the digital divide and connect with those already engaged in the networked society where digital is embodied, embedded and everyday.

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