Redeeming The Internet

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Last month our Internet Campus celebrated her second birthday by streaming church to thousands of people around the world. She's come a long way since that first online gathering of ten which to the best of my knowledge was comprised of a few web developers and my mother. Two years later this amazing tool has beamed the message of Christ to more than 40,000 unique users in 105 countries.

Yet along the way we've heard from countless skeptics who reject the idea of holding church services via live webcast. Arguing the legitimacy of online church has created a division the likes of which has not been seen since the birth of the multi-site movement. With all due respect to television evangelist and prosperity gospel, seldom in Christianity has a modifier impugned its noun quite like Internet has done to church. It's an issue likely to become even more salient in 2010 as more and more churches go online.

Though our only interaction with our mortgage lender, graduate program or bookseller may exist within the confines of a 17-inch monitor, rarely do we question the respective legitimacy of these institutions as banks, schools or businesses. But as pastors enlist, technologies mature and audiences grow, the question will inevitably resurface like an unwanted pop-up ad—is online church really church?

What Is It?

Somewhere online a countdown timer reaches zero, granting access to an online church. It is the front door to an effectual online sanctuary. Churchgoers from various parts of the world populate the site at a specific time to view the live stream of a specific service, utilizing interactive tools that enable participation in almost every function of an offline location—a virtual campus, and virtually a campus.

The global congregation interacts with a media player, embedded on a page and surrounded by widgets. They raise their avatar's hand, chat in a virtual lobby, browse an electronic bulletin, or slip money into a nonexistent offering plate. They introduce themselves to others logged in from hundreds of miles away, pinging short-handed instant messages in the tradition of chat rooms everywhere—they are, characteristically, laughing out loud (LOL), and praising the Lord (PTL). They acquire juice and crackers from their kitchen to participate in communion, or use social networking to attract virtual traffic. An online pastor cuts into the service to specifically address the live audience, reinforcing the effect of a singular and worldwide church body. He is responsible for shepherding his (likely growing) online congregation.

Lifechurch.tv debuted the first online church with its beta version in April 2006, depressing its influential right index finger to execute the "click heard around the world," the Oklahoma-based church's modern-day variation on Martin Luther's equally audible knock.

Since that time, more and more churches have gone online. Seacoast Church, McLean Bible Church and Flamingo Road Church adopted the online church movement in its infancy. As the technical learning curve for live Internet streaming and web 2.0 integration

peaked, it made entry for newer online churches like Saddleback Church and North Point Community Church more practical.

DJ Chuang, Director of Digital Initiatives at Leadership Network and perhaps the world's foremost expert on the history of online church, says that the number of online churches has grown from three to 35 in a matter of two short years.

"We've seen churches implement online campuses in various ways," Chuang said. "Some use it as a fully-functioning church. Others see it as a means of outreach to get people connected to the offline church. Depending on the church's methodology and theological convictions, they might weigh in differently. The real issue is how you define church."

Perhaps in its simplest form online church is defined as a virtual expression of a physical worship service. And while in today's Christian world the only thing growing faster than a congregant's desire to connect online may be the number of ways in which he can, the ascension of online church was inevitable—online worship well behind its dating, networking and commuting counterparts. The online churchgoer like the online student is a product of his generation's desire to capitalize on the power of technology, and is likely to multiply in numbers for years to come. We've seen this firsthand at McLean Bible Church. In two short years, our Internet Campus has grown in weekly attendance from 10 to more than 3,000.

"I think online churches are here to stay," Chuang said. "They are a viable strategy for outreach, forming community and building relationships, in the fellowship sense as well as the discipleship sense."

"[Online pastors] are figuring out how to do more things like mission trips and meet-ups, making their online and offline experiences more seamless."

Is It Really Church?

Mark Driscoll, Preaching and Theology Pastor at Mars Hill Church in Seattle, is arguably the most prominent opponent of online church. Driscoll maintains that at best online church could be considered a ministry of a church, merely a supplement to one's physical place of worship. His skepticism revolves around passages like Acts 2:46-47 and the definition of a New Testament church. He maintains that online church introduces theological questions (Is online communion a rightly administered sacrament?) and pragmatic ones (Does online church promote American consumerism?)

Brandon Donaldson of Lifechurch.tv holds the distinction of being the world's first online church pastor, and a strong conviction about the effectiveness of online church. "The Church is all about people," Donaldson said. "The Internet is just some tool we created, and I think all churches should use it.

"You can't do everything online, but you also can't do everything in a church building. Either way, we are just passionate about the Kingdom of God. Our heart is to fulfill what the church should be, and I do know that [online church] can facilitate that."

One thing Driscoll and Donaldson are likely to agree on is that when it comes to being a safe place for believers, the Internet's track record is far less than exemplary. It serves as a sobering reminder that the Internet needs redeeming. That the church could use more leaders that view the Internet as a mission field, and developers that provide our wandering cursors with edifying places to land. That our fallen state is a reality that exists within the confines of a virtual

reality, our sinfulness a worldwide problem that traverses the worldwide web.

Chuang said the Internet levels the playing field for everyone who wants to have a voice. "If you're present there, you can reach people," he said. "If you're not present, there's no way to connect. To be absent from cyber space is to have no effect there."

Though it's reputation precedes it, and while attempting to use the Internet for good in today's world seems to place one in the vast minority, I've long since concluded that it is not a lost cause. Through our experience with online church we've learned that the Internet and its notorious library of unedifying content are being redeemed. Stories flood our inboxes each week of how God proves Himself faithful to an online audience.

A Singaporean woman worships with her husband and son each week during the long process of acquiring her visa to come to the United States. Her husband is strengthened by a timely message on endurance amidst trials. A Virginia woman suffers from a chronic illness that prevents her from attending in person. She exclaims that the message is often so good that she has to tune in twice—from bed. A mother in Tennessee logs on to watch her daughter perform in the church choir and unexpectedly prays with our pastor to receive Christ. Her daughter tells us, ineffectively fighting back tears, that she now has a new mom.

These stories and countless others serve as humbling reminders that God is at work online. Hundreds if not thousands have already found faith in Christ with online church, but there's nothing virtual about His love for them. While they may spend far too much time tweeting, their status in the eyes of God will always say, "Redeemed." Their souls have a place in Heaven being prepared just for them and

no virus or hacker that can take that away.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life," says John 3:16, and God's word, online or off, never returns to Him with an error message.

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