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Virtual Communities and Mission
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1. Introduction

The role of the community has become increasingly central in understanding mission. This has been, in part, motivated in reaction against the individualized mission of the 'missionary era', in a recognition of the hunger for relationships found in western societies, and in an awareness of the key role of community in non-western society.[1] In thinking about how best to further the church's mission, various definitions and characteristics of church communities have been explored. So we find the World Council of Churches (WCC) project on the 'missionary structure of congregations'[2] and Warren's work on 'missionary congregations'.[3]

At the same time, the wider under-standing of community has changed as society has changed. One key change over the last hundred years has been the increasingly mobile nature of society arising out of developments in transport.[4] This has weakened the link between physical location and community. Looking forward, one of the key changes for the next century appears to be the development of 'virtual communities' in cyberspace. This is the culmination of the development of the internet over the last 25 years.

The aim of this paper is to examine the nature of virtual communities in the context of current mission thinking. To do this we will need to start by examining our understanding of the term 'community', both in general and in terms of current mission thinking. Then we will trace the

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1 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), pp. 368 f.

2 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 472.

3 Robert Warren, *Being Human, Being Church* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995).

4 Warren, *Being Human*, pp. 167-71; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 240 ff.

development of virtual communities and their definitions. We will then be in a position to explore virtual communities from the perspective of mission.

2. Communities

Sociologists have developed many definitions of community. These definitions have been divided into three groups: descriptive definitions, value definitions and active definitions.[5] Communities are an example of a social group: 'a number of people who interact with each other on a regular basis'. Such regularity of interaction tends to weld participants together as a distinct unit with an overall social identity. Members of a group expect certain forms of behaviour from one another that are not demanded of non-members.'[6] Such groups come in primary and secondary forms differentiated by the level of emotional involvement.[7]

In this article I am interested in descriptive definitions of primary Christian communities which are designed to enable mission. Although most authors do not give precise sociological definitions of such communities, I want to suggest here that they have particular elements to their social identity, behaviour and forms of interaction. As a part of their overall social identity, such communities will obviously have a shared commitment to the Christian faith, although understandings of that faith may differ from one community to another.[8] Within this, Jesus is the central character around whom the community revolves. [9]They will be a community characterized by praise and hope, two features largely lacking in modern society.[10] Through modelling what is needed but absent from society, the social identities of such communities will point forwards towards a new social order and act as a witness to those outside.

This social identity will be seen in the behaviour of individual members of the community. Their behaviour will be characterized by love, following the 'great commandment', the work of the Spirit, the self-giving Christ, and the wider life of the Trinity. As Warren points out, 'In this work of community building the church participates in the Trinity, for the dynamic of a missionary congre-

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5 Accounts of social forms, structures and interactions that can be observed; statements about how people ought to relate; and definitions related to the process of community development. Greg Smith, *Community-Arianism, Chapter 1: Introduction*, web book (<http://www.communities.org.uk/greg/chap1.html>, 1996), 1. Smith's particular interest is in communitarianism, 'a 1990's political philosophy stressing the importance of community and shared values for social order and stability'; Tony Bilton, et al., *Introductory Sociology*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 504. Smith puts this interest within a much wider context.

6 Anthony Giddens, *Sociology*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 285.

7 Giddens, *Sociology*, pp. 285-86.

8 This article will not delve into definitions of 'Christian faith' but assumes a general definition such as those given by the historic creeds.

9 In line with recent New Testament thinking on Jesus as the key to the redefinition of Israel; N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 2 (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 317.

10 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), p. 227; Esther D. Reed, 'Community of Hope' in *Essentials of Christian Community*, David F. Ford and Dennis L. Stamps (eds.) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 281.

gation living in the image of God expresses the nature of the God revealed in Christ—*giving*, *celebrating*, *creative* and *love-in-community*.'[11] It is a love that enables people to look outward in confidence for the future. This behaviour displays a commitment to live for others, particularly those outside the community and especially the poor.

Individuals' behaviour is shaped by various interactions within and outside the community. Relationships between people are sustained by forgiveness and affirmation in an atmosphere of vulnerability that gives a greater ability for people to work together in mission.[12] The community will also interact with God in worship, particularly through word and sacrament. Further, 'A congregation which experiences worship in these ways will undoubtedly have something to say to a needy world.'[13] It is important to note that such interactions are expected to take place largely when people are gathered together in particular locations, which is an important difference from virtual communities, as we will see.

Christian communities should be seen as 'the primary bearer of mission'.[14] Such communities will, I suggest, be characterized by certain interactions between its members and with God. These will form the behaviour of individuals and give a social identity which points the way forward for society. Key to such communities is the impetus to look outwards to the needs of those outside the community and towards God.

3. Virtual communities

The internet has grown from 1000 to 10 million users over the last 25 years.[15] It developed on the back of computer developments and was initially aimed at facilitating information exchange between defence and research staff. Computers have been seen as enabling society to focus on information rather than on the material goods that were a focus of the industrial revolution. Hence recent western society has been termed an 'Information Society' with the computer being the defining key symbol. [16]However, the advent of the internet goes beyond information to community.

The first development from information exchange to community came as a result of a Bulletin Board (BBS) in 1978, and users of the system were heralded as 'agents of a new kind of social experiment' with the first message being 'We are as gods and might as well get good at it.'[17] This developed into news-

11 Warren, *Being Human*, p. 124.

12 Warren, *Being Human*, p. 91.

13 Michael Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere* (London: Collins, Flame, 1990), p. 205.

14 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 472.

15 Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994), p. 8.

16 David Lyon, *The Information Society: Issues and Illusions* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), pp. x, 16, 123.

17 Alluequere Rosanne Stone, 'Sex and Death Among the Disembodied: VR, Cyberspace, and the Nature of Academic Discourse' in *The Cultures of Computing*, Susan Leigh Star (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 247.

groups on the internet of which there are now more than five thousand ,involving in excess of 2.5 million people.[18] In such groups the exchange of information leads to a clearly defined social identity based on key community members and subject foci. In a related, but separate, development the World Wide Web has grown and simulates a world-wide community, each member having their own 'shop front' web pages. This has led one sociologist to claim that the internet has moved us from a 'culture of calculation' to a 'culture of simulation'.[19] Virtual communities are a prime example of this change.

Virtual communities come in many different forms, often denoted by letters: WELL, MUDs, BBS, Usenet, IRC and, of course, good old newsgroups. These form a whole 'ecosystem of subcultures'. We can broadly see two types of virtual communities: those linked with real-life and those based on assumed identities. An example of those based on real-life is WELL[20] conferencing system. Rheingold describes this as a community of people he has come to care deeply about, a community that develops over time and meets the practical needs of daily life. Turkle comments on how one person involved in WELL reflected how 'one ceases to believe in a self independ-

ent of the relations in which he or she is embedded'.[21]

An example of communities with assumed identities is one inspired by the TV series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. You choose an identity 'as close to or as far away from one's "real self" as one chooses' and enter into the *Star Trek* environment, building the rules of social interaction as you go. Such simulations offer 'parallel identities, parallel lives' and are derived from the fantasy roleplay games of the 1970s.[22] Both of these forms of community are (currently) text based, with community members communicating via written sentences or letters.

Thus in virtual communities 'we participate with people from all over the world, people with whom we converse daily, people with whom we may have fairly intimate relationships but whom we may never physically meet'.[23] This is in line with the general compression of spatial and temporal worlds that is a characteristic of postmodernism.[24] Virtual communities provide a sense of fulfilment, answers to our questions and support for one another—the 'collective goods' that Rheingold suggests define a community. For many people virtual and real-life communities are mixed together in their minds:

> Not only do I inhabit my virtual communities; to the degree that I carry around their conversations in my head and

18 Nancy K. Baym, 'From Practice to Culture on Usenet,' in *The Cultures of Computing*, Susan Leigh Star (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 31.

19 Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the internet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), p. 19.

20 Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link

21 Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 257.

22 Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, pp. 11-14.

23 Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, pp. 9-10.

24 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp. 240 ff.

begin to mix it up with them in real life, my virtual communities also inhabit my life. I've been colonized; my sense of family at the most fundamental level has been virtualised.[25]

Virtual communities affect both our expression of society and our individual self-identity. They can help develop self-identity in a positive way. But, particularly with simulation communities, they pose the problem of how people can have multiple identities and yet remain sane. Turkle suggests an answer to this based on Lifton's concept of a 'protean self' capable of 'fluid transformations but is grounded in coherence and a moral outlook. It is multiple but integrated. You can have a sense of self without being one self.'[26]

In all of this the internet medium has developed to a level far beyond what its creators envisaged. Rather than just serving us by providing a means of exchanging information, it begins to be a basis from which our self-definition comes. Turkle argues that 'Computers don't just do things for us, they do things to us, including our ways of thinking about ourselves and other people'.[27] Future understandings of self and community need to take account of this impact computers have.

The debate still continues as to the sense in which virtual communities are communities in sociological terms.[28] However, I want to suggest a definition for virtual communities. For any one community the interaction between individuals can be seen to be characterized by four factors:

(1) interactions are between geographically dispersed individuals;
(2) they use text-based communication;
(3) communication is one-way with delayed responses; and
(4) members may assume identities not their own.[29]

It is hard to generalise on the actual content of such interactions without reference to particular communities; this goes beyond the scope of this essay.

It is harder to identify how such interactions affect the behaviour of individuals. It is clear that virtual communities can stimulate their members to care for one another and understand the needs and views of those from different cultural backgrounds, as Rheingold illustrates. Yet, I suggest, there is a tendency to look no further than the virtual community. Edwards argues that virtual communities can become 'closed subjective worlds' and as such can lead to a disconnection with the real

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25 Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, p. 10.
26 Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 258.
27 Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 26.

28 Greg Smith, *Community-Arianism, Chapter 8: Community Connections in an Information Society*, web book (<http://www.communities.org .uk/greg/chap8.html>, 1996), p. 5.
29 It is useful to compare these with communities formed through the technological advances of telephone and ham radio. They are similar except for the use of voice and not text and less delayed responses. This also, perhaps, makes it harder for individuals to assume other identities in those mediums.

world.[30] Rheingold argues that virtual communities could revitalize wider social democracy, which in one sense illustrates an outward looking attitude. This view is based on including more people in virtual communities rather than building links between virtual and non-virtual communities. The counter example to these is where communities are able to include those usually excluded from other communities, such as the ill or disabled.

The social identity of virtual communities is highly relational and based on particular shared interests. They are characterized by mutual encouragement and exploration of new ideas and ways of being society, through simulation and use of alternative identities. But we need caution because many virtual communities are fluid and transitory and so will have changing identities.[31]

4. Virtual communities and mission

Before we look at virtual communities from the perspective of mission, there are a number of issues that need clarifying. When we look at the definition of virtual communities it is clear that there is a difference between them and the use of the internet in 'networking', which focuses more on information exchange. Much has been done in using the internet in networking amongst world mission agencies, and Siewert gives a comprehensive review of these.[32] Less thought has gone into virtual communities, which are our concern here.

In comparing virtual and non-virtual communities we need to bear in mind that they are not distinct, and each influences the other; there is a constant interplay between 'technology' and 'society'.[33] We also need to be aware that virtual communities exist in a time of change, and so further changes can be expected. In particular, Lyon has noted that 'the expanding diversity of channels and commodities within the "electronic culture" is leading, paradoxically, to less rather than more choice. That is to say, choice is increasingly circumscribed by commercial criteria.'[34] Microsoft's attempts to dominate the internet browser market illustrate this pressure, and show that a possible result is the setting up of new limits to virtual communities.

I want to suggest that the appearance of virtual communities reflects the *missio dei* of the creator God. It has been widely noted that computer users have suffered a common

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30 He uses the example of how a US Air Force surveillance centre during the Vietnam war gave people the cosy view of great victories, belied by the failure on the ground. A closed computerised world cuts people off from the real events they were supposed to be affecting. Paul N. Edwards, 'Cyberpunks in Cyberspace: The Politics of Subjectivity in the Computer Age,' in *The Cultures of Computing*, Susan Leigh Star (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 70-71.

31 See Smith's review of virtual communities in the light of Etzioni's criteria of community. Smith, *Community Connections*, p. 6.

32 John A. Siewert, 'Information Technology and the Communication of the Gospel', paper presented at Congress on the World Mission of the Church (Luther Seminary, Minnesota, 1998).

33 Lyon, *The Information Society*, p. viii.

34 Lyon, *The Information Society*, p. 129.

pattern of addiction and isolation.[35] Where there is isolation we could expect God to be at work bringing community, for God did not create us to be alone (Gen. 2:18) and later went about forming the communities of Israel and the church. Virtual communities offer new forms of community particularly appropriate for computer users. These should be approached in a positive light as a part of God's working. That is not to say that they cannot be used for ill as well as good, and neither is it to deny that human responsibility is important.[36] As more people use computers we may expect the importance of virtual communities to increase, but as yet their application is limited by the level of computer knowledge that users have.

Comparing the definitions of Christian mission and virtual communities, we see the important need for virtual communities to be directed outwards if they are to be a vehicle for Christian mission. It is not sufficient to talk, as Rheingold does, about 'collective goods' as if community is all about goods received from others. The desire to include others in virtual communities is a step along the way to looking outwards, but it is a step that finds it hard to include people if they are unable or choose not to join the virtual community. This contrasts with Christian mission

which does seek to incorporate people into a Christian community through evangelism, but which seeks to serve others even if they don't respond to the evangelistic outreach.[37]

The pressure against looking too far outwards is inherent in any emphasis on community in this postmodern era. Harvey notes that one response to the time-space compression is to find 'an intermediate niche for political and intellectual life which spurns grand narrative but which does cultivate the possibility of limited action. This is the progressive angle to postmodernism which emphasises community and locality, place and regional resistance, social movements, respect for otherness, and the like.' He argues that it is hard to stop this approach sliding into parochialism, with the risk of narrow and sectarian politics.[38] Christian mission needs to challenge this tendency in virtual communities in order to look beyond the narrow views and self-understanding of such a community.

Looking outwards with a commitment to the poor is a key emphasis for Christian communities in mission, most often seen in liberation theology and Base Christian Communities.[39] This commitment is more than just intellectual understanding; it is about working to change the conditions that keep

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35 See, for example, the sociological work of Turkle quoted by I. Barbour, *Ethics in an Age of Technology*, The Gifford Lectures 1989-1991, Vol. 2 (London: SCM, 1992), p. 158.

36 see Barbour, *Ethics*, pp. 175-76 for a summary of the good and bad uses of computer technology, although he writes without reference to the internet.

37 The distinction between evangelism and mission is important here, as outlined by Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 411-12, with mission being the wider call of the church sent into the world.

38 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 351.

39 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 432 ff.

people poor. It is difficult to see how virtual communities can be committed to the poor, especially since technology is usually seen as increasing the divide between rich and poor. Barbour comments on how computers increase the divide in terms of information and hence power.[40] Smith expresses the cultural exclusion that comes from the internet with its bias towards educated English speakers.[41] People such as Rheingold suggest the need is to encourage more and more people to join the internet, and yet this is meaningless for the poor who may not even have a radio, let alone a computer.[42]

The centrality of Jesus to mission communities suggests the need for an incarnational approach which connects a virtual community with people where they are. One approach would be to establish explicit links between a virtual community and a community of the poor. An example along this way is the newsgroup of the Christian Peacemakers Team in Israel-Palestine. They work amongst the poor and oppressed and distribute news of the people they work with, using the newsgroup, in a way that helps the virtual community to enter into the suffering of others, face the challenges and then to act.[43]

We need to be careful that this approach does not degenerate into a 'church-for-others' rather than a 'church-with-others'; it would then be easy to divide between 'us' (in the virtual community) and 'them' (the poor).[44] But inclusion of the voices of the poor into the virtual community and the communication of the discussions of the virtual community with the poor could work towards wider understanding and involvement. They can offer the poor a greater voice than we often find with existing mission links around the world, where the perspective often comes from letters by a western missionary edited by a western media department.

It is difficult to identify the general content of virtual community interactions, but if the community is to act as a witness in mission then these interactions need to be characterized by forgiveness, affirmation and a sense of working together. By doing so they will reflect the life of the Trinity.

Various people have noted the relevance of the Trinity in a postmodern world,[45] but I think further reflections on virtual communities over the internet will provide new models for understanding the Trinity. That is not to say that we can reduce God to the exchange of 'bits' of information, but

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40 Barbour, *Ethics*, p. 175.

41 Smith, *Community Connections*, p. 3.

42 Lyon, *The Information Society*, p. 14.

43 <http://www.prairienet.org/cpt/>. Although not a true virtual community in that it does not usually include interaction from outside Israel-Palestine, I believe it points a way forward.

44 I am using the terms as does Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 436, although I am aware, for example, that Bonhoeffer uses the phrase 'church for others' in a way that corresponds to Bosch's 'church with others'. The important issue here is that an incarnational approach implies a level of identification with others that goes beyond charity at a distance.

45 For example, P. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology*, Trinity & Truth Series (London: DLT, 1998), pp. 3-18.

the model of diversified communication represented by the internet may lead to a more complex understanding of Trinitarian life. It is a life comprised of a multitude of communications happening at once which encompasses a world of different situations and interests simultaneously.[46] This may lead to an understanding of God that is more attractive evangelistically in this postmodern age and one which also fits with the 'everywhere to everywhere' understanding of mission currently underlying the work of many mission agencies.[47]

This reference to the life of the Trinity signals the need to ensure that virtual communities interact with God. The reliance on text by virtual communities suggests the potential importance of Scripture in the definition and mission of such communities. This could end up being reduced to the passing round of Bible texts, but the simulation opportunities of virtual communities suggest a more creative way forward. In Ignatian spirituality, the 'Exercises' work at enabling people to enter into biblical stories in order to encounter the God behind the story.[48] This often involves imagining being a character in the story and thinking about the reaction of such characters to what is happening, and where they sense God at work in this.

This process is not so different from assuming a different identity and entering into a simulated world. It would be a challenging way forward to simulate a world based on the biblical text and the stories contained within it, and then to ask people to enter into that world, experience situations in that world and through that encounter God. Such an approach has much to commend itself in the work of mission, enabling people to enter into a Christian world-view, pose their questions, gain a greater understanding of God and thus re-evaluate their identity. It is an approach which combines dialogue with evangelism—two aspects which are often found in tension in mission.

Worship is another requirement if virtual communities are to interact with God and be characterized by praise. A recent survey of US teenagers and adults suggests that 'by 2010 we will probably have 10% to 20% of the population relying primarily or exclusively upon the internet for its religious input'.[49] Thus this issue is likely to become more crucial. The most obvious way forward, given the textual nature of the medium, is to consider the inclusion of liturgical worship into the life of virtual communities.[50] The internet

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46 Compare with the more strict understanding of Trinity represented by S. Pickard, 'The Trinitarian Dynamics of Belief' in *Essentials of Christian Community*, David F. Ford and Dennis L. Stamps (eds.) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 63-75, or S. Chan, 'Sharing the Trinitarian Life' in *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, Thomas F. Best and Gunther Gassmann (eds.) Faith and Order Paper, no. 166 (Geneva: WCC, 1994), pp. 85-90.

47 Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere*.

48 Gerard W. Hughes, *God of Surprises* (London: DLT, 1985).

49 Barna Research Group, 'The Cyberchurch is Coming' web page (<http://www.barna.org/Press CyberChurch.htm>, 1998).

50 It may also be possible to include graphics such as icons which are an important part of worship for many.

vastly increases the number of sources for liturgical worship and allows more easily the construction of locally appropriate (contextualised) liturgies.[51]

However, worship needs to be linked in with a historical and theological tradition if it is to form a part of the worship of the Christian community world-wide and through the ages. It also needs to be enriched from cross-fertilization with other areas of the Christian faith such as doctrine and social justice.[52] Again we are encountering the danger of virtual communities becoming cut off from the wider communities, which are essential to their growth and vitality.

However, I would argue that if worship is encouraged then these other things will follow. As White states, we 'must take the power of worship seriously…[it] has the power to shape individuals and communities; to provide a vision of the world as God intends it to be; to inculturate the biblical values of justice, peace and the integrity of creation'.[53] We must let virtual communities be shaped by the experience of God, bringing hope for the future.

Virtual communities offer a significant challenge to church communities in many different ways. For example, they arise in the context of the internet, which is often linked with the postmodern culture[54] and are perhaps more in touch with some people outside the church, and more contextualised, than are traditional Christian communities. In this they challenge the church to look outwards to include those of other cultures who have little church contact. Virtual communities also break down some of the barriers between countries and peoples and make communication and understanding possible. This raises the question of the extent to which the world-wide church has broken down the barriers between its members in different countries and enabled them to understand situations and cultures very different from their own. I suspect there is much work to be done in this area, and mission agencies have only just begun to address the issue.

Virtual communities also allow great freedom of expression without censorship by authorities. This is a challenge to the church leadership who may want to control who speaks and what they speak about. Young people, for example, often feel excluded from leadership and expression.[55] At another level virtual

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51 Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), pp. 48-49.

52 White, *Christian Worship*, p. 58.

53 White, *Christian Worship*, p. 124.

54 Smith, *Community Connections*, p. 2.

55 There are two down-sides to this freedom of expression. Firstly, the internet gives as much validity to fringe groups as to 'main-line' groups, so it is possible to get an unequal say; it is not possible to evaluate how many people hold to an expressed view by the number of web pages or communities devoted to the view. I owe this observation to Bill Damick of Trans World Radio. Secondly, this freedom can lead to expressions which the majority of people would find morally unacceptable, such as communities encouraging child pornography. More work needs to be done in the area of ethics and virtual communities.

communities challenge the church in the way that they give personal support that the local church pastoral system may not be able to match.

5. Conclusion

Virtual communities will continue to grow and develop, becoming an increasing part of the identity of many people. They are a vehicle for both good and ill, and the challenge for the church is to find ways of using them for good. If we are to use virtual communities as a vehicle for mission, then we need to challenge their tendency towards narrowness and find ways of directing them outwards. Ways need to be found of linking virtual communities with real-life communities, especially those of the poor and oppressed. They also need to be linked with an experience of the Trinitarian God through worship and Scripture. Despite their limitations, virtual communities are managing to include people who often feel excluded from institutional church life, and the church needs to learn about contemporary postmodern culture from the contextualisation inherent in virtual communities. The possibility of new theological and missiological insights must be pursued. Some progress has been made in these directions, but more is required.[56]

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56 This essay illustrates some of the progress made in the very helpful suggestions given to the author by members of the Lausanne research community. Particular thanks to Dave Nesmith, Bishop Brian Carrell, John Roxborogh, James Craig, Bill Damick, Greg Smith, John Siewert and Tony Whittaker. I may not have taken all their comments on board, but they helped me see new angles on the subject.

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