



## A Church body without bodies?



Over the past years, some people have begun to establish “virtual churches” online. Virtual worlds, like the one called “Second Life,” allow people to immerse themselves in computer-simulated environments using a graphical representation of their character called an avatar.

In these virtual spaces, people direct their avatars to do the same things they do in the real world, such as traveling, using and building things, and interacting with other avatars. But what about attending a virtual church? Should churches embrace this new medium and worship as digital flocks in a virtual world?

Several years ago Flamingo Road Church established an Internet Campus and an Internet Campus pastor. Another online church, LifeChurch.tv, offers several online “weekly worship experiences” and has bought “real estate” in Second Life and built a church with seating for avatars to attend church. There are numerous other virtual churches such as St. Pixels, i-church and the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life. Supporters of virtual churches point to the millions of people in cyberspace, most of whom are unreached. Simon Jenkins, one of the early virtual church pioneers, observed “It’s like someone has created a new town and no one has thought to build a church there. It’s almost scandalous.”

But can a virtual church really be a true church? The Belgic Confession teaches that the true marks of the church include the preaching of the word, the administration of the sacraments and the practice of church discipline. It seems plausible that one could preach the word and share the gospel in a virtual world, but what about the sacraments? Already, there have been virtual baptisms and virtual communion services online. Another question is whether the *koinonia* of a physical community can be reproduced



*Should we be sending missionary avatars into online communities, like this virtual church?*

online. Is there something distinctive about real physical interactions or might they one day become indistinguishable from virtual experiences? Should missions agencies associated with denominations like the Christian Reformed Church send church planters into Second Life?

### New mission field?

In his book, *SimChurch*, Douglas Estes explores what the theology of “virtual church” might look like. Estes suggests that there are no Biblical directives that would forbid establishing a virtual church. In fact, he argues that Jesus’ words to the Samaritan woman at the well place the emphasis in worship not on physical place or geography, but rather in the Spirit and in truth (John 4:20-24).

In contrast, several writers on the topic of faith and technology warn about the impoverished form of community and

presence in cyberspace. Tim Challies writes in his book *The Next Story* that cyberspace is “a space that is really no ‘place’ at all.” Shane Hipps notes in his book *Flickering Pixels* that social networks give the illusion of intimacy but at a level that is just enough to act as a substitute for real intimacy. Douglas Groothuis, in his book *The Soul in Cyberspace*, writes that virtuality should not “beguile us into mistaking connectivity for community.” Brad Kallenberg provides an even stronger critique in his book *God and Gadgets* where he argues that human communication requires three conditions: time, place and bodies, things that technology “bewitches us into thinking we can ignore.” There are also concerns specific to virtual worlds: encountering avatars engaging in perverse activities, the separation of physicality and identity and the possibility of having multiple personas.

As technology continues to advance, there may come a point when we are able to see, smell, touch and move about in virtual environments that remove the boundaries of place and the restrictions that apply to our physicality. Once physical senses are captured and reproduced with fidelity in a virtual world, the arguments for a virtual church may become more challenging to refute.

Can a virtual church be an authentic church? Can there be a body of believers that meets without bodies? My instincts tell me that even in our high-tech world, there is something important about our bodies and about physical community. As we enter lent, we are reminded of Christ, the Word made flesh, who gave his physical body as a sacrifice and later rose bodily from the grave. And one day, we will live forever, not as disembodied spirits in an ethereal heaven, but with new physical bodies in a new heaven and earth. ✈

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