Exploring Holy Communion Online

Dawn Chesser

Introduction

My context is that of a PhD candidate in Liturgical Studies at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. I also serve as the Director of Preaching Ministries at the General Board of Discipleship. I am currently in the final stages of writing a doctoral dissertation on the practice of offering Holy Communion over the internet by United Methodist or United Methodist-affiliated individuals. I have been working on this research project for over four years and plan to complete the study by February 2014. What you will find below is a shortened version of the “Case Studies” chapter from my dissertation. I also offer a selected bibliography, which I hope will be of use to you as you consider the upcoming meeting on this subject for the denomination.

This document is intended to introduce participants in the meeting to examples of Holy Communion currently being offered over the internet. Participants are invited to go to each site and “walk through” the process through which the sacrament is offered. Since each example will build on the previous example it would be most useful for the participant to read the supporting documentation, look at the sites in the order listed and then consider the questions that arise out of each example.

Example 1: Alpha Church

www.alphachurch.org

Alpha Church is a self-described non-denominational “full online global Christian Church” that offers on-demand worship opportunities twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, including sermons, Holy Communion and Christian Baptism. Its pastor, the Rev. Patricia E. Walker, identifies herself as having been born into a long line of Methodist ministers and received ordination as an Elder in full connection with the New Mexico Conference of the United Methodist Church. She claims she has since “transferred to non-denominational status in order to Pastor Alpha Church.” However, her biography suggests continued strong ties to the United Methodist tradition.

Descriptions on the website, along with other supporting documents, suggest that the purpose behind the establishment of Alpha Church is primarily missional and evangelistic. Rev. Walker describes the impetus behind her decision to found the web-based church this way:

1 In a telephone conversation on September 21, 2011, between the author and the Administrative Assistant to the Bishop of the New Mexico Conference of the United Methodist Church the author was told that Patricia Walker had voluntarily surrendered her orders. As such, her orders were not transferred from the United Methodist church to another ecclesiastical entity.
While a church pastor, I attended a preaching conference at SMU where the Lord planted the idea for an internet church into my heart and mind in 1998. Shortly after that, the Alpha church governing board was formed. At that time most people pointed to the internet and said, "There's just smut on the internet. Why would anyone even be interested in the internet?" Yet, I believe the Lord had plans for His Word to go into all Nations through Alpha Church…

Our church was founded as non-denominational, and two paraplegic young men gave us feedback as to what appealed to them spiritually, visually, and logistically. Shortly after we started Alpha Church we discovered that the internet was an excellent way to draw in people who could not get to "regular" church. As we expected, our church also appealed to those who were computer savvy.²

In addition to this statement on the website information on Alpha Church can be found in the book Under the Radar: Learning from Risk-Taking Churches by Bill Easum and Bill Tinney-Brittian. Easum and Tinney-Brittian’s book devotes an entire chapter to describing Alpha Church, naming it as the only current example of a full-service online church, as distinguished from a church that has a website and offers and online worship option. A “full-service cyberchurch” is defined by these authors as “a church without walls that ‘meets’ electronically for worship, evangelism, relationship-building, discipleship, and empowerment to do good works of service. A full-service cyberchurch accomplishes everything that the typical church can accomplish including communion, baptisms, offerings, sermons, singing, and so on.”³

According to Easum and Tinney-Brittian, Alpha Church has been online since 1999. It has received more than one and a half million hits and, in 2005, had “about six thousand participants and more than one hundred members from all over the world.”⁴ While Easum and Tinney-Brittian’s purpose is neither to critique nor advocate for online churches or any of the other examples of non-traditional churches described in the book, they do raise some important questions about these types of church communities.

The experience of receiving Holy Communion at Alpha Church takes the following shape. Upon clicking on the link, “Take Holy Communion,” the participant is given instructions on how to prepare for what is labeled “Holy Communion-Eucharist.” Participants are to gather communion elements, to include something to drink “like juice, water, soup, broth, tea or milk” and something to eat, such as “a cracker, a small piece of bread, a little piece of a tortilla, or a few grains of cooked rice.”⁵

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⁴ Ibid. 35.
The following instructions are then offered: “During the Communion-Eucharist service the elements will be blessed/sanctified and you will eat and drink them. You may light a candle nearby to represent the light of Christ. Background music is included with the service of Holy Communion. Turn your speaker volume to a medium level. Read aloud with the responses during the Service. You may take Holy Communion as often as you wish. The service is changed periodically.” In the three-year period during which this research was conducted the service options were not changed.

Participants are then invited to join responsively in one of three services offered. There is also an invitation at the bottom of the page to “Email the Pastor to receive Confession and Absolution” if desired. Each of the Holy Communion-Eucharist services is accompanied by music and artwork. In the non-responsive portions of the service the participant listens to the sound of a female voice (presumably that of Rev. Patricia Walker) and during the responsive portions the participant joins his or her voice with a chorus of two or three other recorded voices emanating from the site. The first option (“First Holy Communion-Eucharist Service”) appears to be taken directly from the liturgy of *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, Word and Table I with the exception of a few minor changes in the anaphora. However, no references as to the origins of the liturgies are cited on the website.

Questions to consider: Are bread and fruit of the grape vine normative, or can any type of starch and/or liquid suffice? Rev. Walker states “you may take Holy Communion as often as you wish.” Does this concept fit with Wesley’s call to the “Duty of Constant Communion?” Is there a difference between Holy Communion being offered live, in real-time, or can it be offered on-demand “as often as you wish” (as it is in this example)?

**Holy Communion on the Web**

[www.holycommunionontheweb.org](http://www.holycommunionontheweb.org)

Even though Dr. Thomas Madron conceived and produced the “Holy Communion on the Web” website in 2007, the site was disabled in January of 2009, and was not fully accessible again until sometime in 2011. During the period when the website was unavailable, a link was provided to access Dr. Madron’s apologetic paper, entitled “Can We Provide Holy Communion Over the Web,” ([http://holycommunionontheweb.org/holycommunion.htm](http://holycommunionontheweb.org/holycommunion.htm)), written sometime after 2007 and updated to the latest version available online in March of 2011. Endnote 6 in this paper reveals the reason for the interruption in service: “The website is currently off-line (1/13/2009) due to a directive of my Bishop contending that I have exceeded my authority as a Licensed Local Pastor duly appointed to a local church. Please check it

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6 Ibid.


8 The latest date of revision of the site is given as June 12, 2011, which may indicate the approximate date that the site was reinstated.
from time-to-time to see if this issue has been resolved.” Further investigation revealed that Dr. Madron has since retired from ministry and is no longer under appointment as a Licensed Local Pastor in the Tennessee Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. Since the crux of Madron’s argument is that ordination is not a requirement for consecrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion, his status, either as ordained, licensed, or retired, might not be at issue so long as he makes no direct claim to be a duly appointed pastor in the United Methodist Church. Although his website does not explicitly state his current status in the United Methodist Church, he argues his position as a Methodist and a self-proclaimed Wesleyan scholar, and he utilizes United Methodist liturgy in his communion service. Thus, as in the previous example, though he makes no direct claim as such, one could infer from his website that he is associated with the United Methodist Church.

The Holy Communion on the Web Service features a split screen with a white page offering written instructions or explanations (in italics) and liturgical texts placed adjacent to a photograph of a stained glass window. The service is a blend of several United Methodist communion liturgies, including “A Service of Word and Table I” (henceforth WT I), “A Service of Word and Table IV” (henceforth WT IV) and one prayer from “A Service of Word and Table V with Persons who are Sick or Homebound” (WT V), all taken directly (except when noted otherwise) from the United Methodist Book of Worship. A link on the website labeled “About” identifies the liturgy as being based on Thomas Cranmer’s sixteenth-century liturgy composed for use in the Church of England and utilized as one of the liturgical options available within the United Methodist Church. Clicking on the link entitled “Communion” leads to the opportunity

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10 Information on Madron’s status obtained via phone conversation between the author and the Secretary of Ministerial Concerns, Tennessee Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, September 22, 2011.

11 Word and Table IV is a remaking of the traditional text from the rituals of the former Methodist and former Evangelical United Brethren churches into the ecumenical pattern of the Great Thanksgiving and made to fit the theological shape of Word and Table.

12 BOW, A Service of Word and Table I (33-39), A Service of Word and Table IV (41-50), and A Service of Word and Table V with Persons who are Sick or Homebound (51-53).


The Communion liturgy used here is based on that devised by Thomas Cranmer in the 16th Century for the Church of England. An edited version of the Cranmer liturgy is the traditional Methodist service of Holy Communion. Although the full Cranmer Communion liturgy includes more than the Invitation, Prayer of Humble
to participate in the Eucharist Service. A male voice, unidentified at this point, invites participation in the service of Holy Communion, which is defined as an opportunity for “spiritual refreshment.” Later in the service the voice is named in the written instructions and explanations as belonging to the “Celebrant.” Each section of the service is preceded by an italicized explanation for what is about to occur, offered in both audio and text formats.

Questions to consider: Again, here the sacrament is offered on-demand. Is this an issue? Dr. Madron was a local pastor. Does the authorization of a local pastor to preside at the table within the boundaries of the congregation to which he or she is appointed to serve extend to persons who might participate in an online worship service that includes Holy Communion over the internet?

**Grace Incarnate Ministries**

www.revneal.org

Rev. Neal is an ordained Elder in full connection with the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church. In addition to serving a full-time appointment in his conference, he names himself as the “Rector” of Grace Incarnate Ministries, his internet website. Rev. Neal claims the following expertise and academic credentials: “He is a graduate of Southern Methodist University with the B.A. in History, Religious Studies, and Russian Language, Duke University with the M.Div. in Theology and Biblical Studies, and Trinity Graduate College with the Ph.D. in Systematic Theology and New Testament Textual Criticism. His doctoral dissertation was in the field of Sacramental Theology and dealt with protestant and Methodist understandings of the doctrine of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion.”

Access, and Prayer of Consecration, these are the core components of the liturgy along with a prayer of confession.

The Cranmer liturgy was the Communion liturgy used by the Church of England in the 18th Century. In the instructions he gave for the establishment of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States (the parent church of the United Methodist Church) Wesley closely followed the Cranmer liturgy for Holy Communion. Similarly, when the Protestant Episcopal Church (now, the Episcopal Church) was organized after the American Revolution, it too followed the Cranmer liturgy. Today both denominations provide the Cranmer liturgy as one of the liturgies available for Holy Communion. The prayers fundamental to Communion have been located at an appropriate point in the service. The prayers and their order follow current United Methodist use. It is not surprising that there should be somewhat parallel liturgical practices in the United Methodist and Episcopal Churches since they both had their origin in the 18th Century Church of England. This traditional liturgy has been used here because there is more interaction between the Celebrant and the Communicant than is true of some more modern liturgies.

The material on this website that is relevant here is located under the heading of “Communion,” where Rev. Neal provides what he describes as “Liturgical, Theological, Photographic, and Video Resources for Laity and Clergy.”\(^\text{15}\) These resources are further broken down into four areas, including “Communion Theology Resources” (information on the meaning of Eucharist in Christian faith and history), “Communion Liturgical Resources” (Anglican and United Methodist liturgies, plus some additional liturgical resources written by Rev. Neal), “Communion Video Resources,” which feature links to Rev. Neal presiding at the table in a variety of settings, and “Communion Celebration Lab,” which offers a tutorial on best practices for presiding at the Sacrament. At the bottom of the page is the following paragraph:

One final element will be included, both in several of the above-listed sections as well as in its own sub-section: the reception of **Holy Communion Over the Internet**. (This is a link that leads to the services.) As an expression of devotion and as an experimental practice, this subject has garnered a great deal of criticism from multiple quarters, both inside and out of the United Methodist Church. I have written theological articles which address the subject, at length, and I have video communions which allow people to join in with a worshiping congregation as an experiment in practical sacramentality.\(^\text{16}\)

Upon clicking on the link contained in the above paragraph, the participant is taken to a page entitled **Thoughts on Internet Communion** and invited to choose one of the videotaped Eucharistic Celebrations from Rev. Neal’s churches in Texas, currently accessible through links on the site to Youtube.\(^\text{17}\) The participant is instructed to prepare to experience “the means of grace that is the Sacrament of Holy Communion”\(^\text{18}\) by gathering bread, “any kind of bread: a hotdog bun, a piece of sliced bread, a biscuit, a dinner roll, pita bread, a flour tortilla,” and wine or grape juice. Rev. Neal also instructs that the participant **will need faith in Jesus Christ.** By faith I do not mean just ‘belief.’ For belief to become faith it must be put into action; there is no such thing as a passive faith that saves. Even the simple affirmation ‘I believe in Jesus’ is an action ... it requires mental assent and verbal action. To partake of Holy Communion you must do so discerning, by faith, the Real Presence of Jesus and his almighty grace.”\(^\text{19}\) Finally, the participant is invited to play one of the Eucharistic services found on Youtube, and to:

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\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{17}\) Youtube is a free internet video-sharing website. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXTigZS1f5U&feature=related (accessed Sept. 29, 2011).
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid.
...participate in the rite along with the congregation in the video. Keep in mind that you are not presiding at the sacrament; rather I, as the celebrant, am presiding at the table. You are participating, along with my congregation, in the service. It matters not that the video was recorded months or years ago ... time is immaterial to God's grace or to one's being able to participate in a worship service.

Likewise, the elements on your side of the internet are included along with the bread on the table in the video in the prayer of consecration and are also set apart ('consecrated') for the purpose of receiving them as means of grace. Please make sure that, after partaking of the sacrament, you dispose of the left-over elements as are their due: by either consuming them or casting them upon the ground.20

All of the videos feature Rev. Neal presiding at the Sacrament of Holy Communion within the context of a gathered worshiping congregation. Unlike in the previous examples, here there are no texts provided to prompt responses for the viewer during the portions of the liturgy that require participation. Thus, it is difficult for the participant to fully engage in the service if the participant is not familiar with the liturgy. This effectively limits participation to viewing the service and then partaking of the elements. There are many recordings to choose from. All those that have been previewed by the author come from the United Methodist Book of Worship, and represent the seasonal variations.

As an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church, Rev. Neal is very careful to point out that participation in the Eucharist through his online website is an “experiment in Sacramental practice,”21 and is not sanctioned by any denomination, including the United Methodist Church. He states that he is offering this “experiment” as part of a larger invitation to theological reflection and discernment among pastors, theologians, and laypersons. And, in fact, he offers his own theological reflections on the topic, which are available on the website. That said, there is really no disputing the fact that Rev. Neal has been offering a distinctly United Methodist communion practice over the internet since he began videotaping the services and making them available for public consumption in 2003. While he may argue that his is an “experiment in Sacramental practice,” it would be difficult if not impossible to differentiate between what is an “experiment” and what constitutes actual practice in this context. Furthermore, Rev. Neal clearly defends the practice of offering Holy Communion online and finds it to be in keeping with a sound and responsible understanding of Eucharistic theology.

Questions to consider: Can one participate in this as an “experiment in Sacramental practice”? What is the difference between experimentation and actual practice? How can a person participate fully and consciously if there are no responses provided for users? And again, the question of real-time versus on-demand is at issue here. Neal confronts this question directly by arguing that the consecration of the

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
elements when it was recorded extends to all times and all places because “time is immaterial to God's grace or to one's being able to participate in a worship service.”

Communion by Tweet: Rev. Tim Ross (British Methodist Church)

In July of 2010 *Church Times*, a weekly newspaper that reports on issues pertaining to the Anglican Church, published an article announcing that a British Methodist minister by the name of Rev. Tim Ross was planning to offer the Sacrament of Holy Communion by “tweet.” “Tweet” is a name that refers to communication activities made by individuals through an online social networking and microblogging service called Twitter. A tweet refers to text-based posts that users make available to their subscribers or “followers” through the service. Each post can contain up to one 140 characters, and the posts become immediately and simultaneously available to followers in real time.

This case study differs in some significant ways from the previous three. The nature of Twitter as a social networking service that operates in real time, in contrast to a website which an individual user may visit at will, offers participants an opportunity to join with others in such a way that a connection is created between the participants that is, while not physical, communal and simultaneous. This stands in sharp contrast to the above-mentioned websites, all of which reduce participation in the Eucharist through the internet to a single user who chooses to participate in a service alone and at his or her complete control and discretion.

It was precisely this potential communal dimension that sparked Rev. Ross’ notion to plan his “Communion by Tweet” service. The service was announced to Ross’ followers (about 1,200 subscribers at the time) in advance and scheduled to begin at 22.00 (British Standard Time) on August 14, 2010. Ross defended his decision to offer the service by arguing that Twitter was “a community that’s as real and tangible as any local neighborhood and we should be looking to minister to it. The perception of church is often that it is rusting away in antiquated buildings and not in touch with the world around us, but this is a statement that we’re prepared to embrace the technological revolution.”

Participants were instructed to prepare by signing on to the service at the appointed hour and having bread and wine or fruit juice available. Ross’ plan was to post a Eucharistic prayer in seven consecutive tweets, with participants responding at each interval with a responsive tweet of “Amen,” with the service culminating in the instruction to eat the bread and drink the wine. Ross’ original liturgy for this service was as follows:

Father of us all, your people round the world join together in praising you. God of wonder, we marvel at your grace, power and love. Amen.

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From the depths of loving grace you gave us Jesus, your Son, our Saviour. Dying, he brought us forgiveness. Rising, he brings us new life. Amen.

In this simple meal, we remember what Jesus shared with his followers and all that you share with us now in his name. Amen.

Fill us with your Spirit and through his power, bless these gifts of bread and wine to us. Amen.

The body of Christ was given for you. (Take bread) Amen. The blood of Christ was shed for you. (Take wine) Amen.

Thank you that you are our Manna and our Daily Bread. May our food be doing your will and your joy our source of strength. Amen.24

In an interview Ross stated that his hope was to eventually be able to offer the Communion by tweet on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. He also observed, “The extremely brief nature of tweets means that creating a communion prayer for Twitter has been a particular challenge. Sharing in this unique event offers Christians from all denominations the opportunity to show that, despite the doctrinal differences of their individual denominations, they are one in their determination to show the love of Christ to the world.”25

In a subsequent Church Times follow-up to this story, it was reported that the service did not actually take place. The British Methodist Church Faith and Order Committee asked Rev. Ross not to go through with his plan to hold the service because they believed that Communion distributed and received in this manner was “not valid.”26

While the British Methodist Church does not currently have any official statement of specific restriction for offering communion through a virtual medium such as Twitter, the Committee objected to the practice on the grounds that “the idea of ‘remote communion’, where participants receive the bread and wine at the same time, but in different places, ‘conflicts with the ethos of the Conference report “His Presence Makes the Feast” (2003)”27 (read report at http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-holy-communion-in-methodist-church-2003.pdf), which discusses “embodied worship.”” Ross acquiesced and canceled the service, but continued to defend the idea’s potential, noting that

the report’s reference to “disembodied spirits” did not say that participants must be in the same physical place, but rather referred to the attitude of those present.

‘The issue boils down to two questions: Is remote communion a valid

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25 Ibid.
communion? Is the Christian community on the internet a valid, gathered Christian community? If the answer to both these questions is “Yes,” then a communion service performed by such a community of believers must be valid and may be performed.\textsuperscript{28}

While this example refers to an online Eucharist that did not actually take place, it does raise important issues with regard to the nature of community, time, embodiment, and presence in online table practice.

Questions to consider: What difference does it make for the community to be virtually “gathered” in real-time as opposed to the previous examples which are all on-demand? Does a community gathered for worship have to be physically gathered (“embodied” to use the language of the British Methodists) or can a community be virtually gathered for worship?

\textbf{The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life}

\url{www.secondlife.com}

Note that in order to explore this site you will have to download the Second Life app and create an Avatar for yourself. You will then need to become proficient enough to navigate your way on to Epiphany Island, where the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life is located. I highly recommend you do this exercise and attend a prayer meeting or worship service. Note that Second Life operates in Pacific Time.

\textit{Second Life} is an online, three-dimensional virtual reality world that resembles in many ways an interactive MMORPG\textsuperscript{29} (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing) video game. In the world of MMORPG’s, participants take on a personal identity in the form of an “avatar,” which is a self-created character that functions as a three-dimensional graphical representation of the user. Likewise, in the virtual reality world of Second Life, a human individual is represented in the online virtual world in the form of an avatar. Second Life is designed in such a way that its users, known as “residents,” participate in its ongoing development. It includes opportunities for people, functioning through their avatars, to meet, talk and otherwise interact; attend concerts; and visit museums, virtual user-created cities, towns, islands, clubs, shops, and other places of interest, including a number of churches. It also offers its residents opportunities to have jobs, own property, participate in sports, gamble at casinos, go dancing at a nightclub, sit on a virtual beach, attend poetry readings and plays, build homes and other buildings, and run businesses. It even has its own currency, called “Linden dollars,” which can be exchanged for American dollars. Second Life has been online and available for public use since June 2003\textsuperscript{30} and counts among its users people from all over the globe.\textsuperscript{31} In this

\textsuperscript{28} Thornton, “Methodists Halt Twitter.”


way, it offers its residents a unique opportunity to socialize, and even worship, with an international community. It also affords an opportunity to represent oneself in whatever way one chooses. Individuals can represent themselves as being from another culture, or of a different gender or body type; likewise, persons with disabilities or with limited mobility can overcome their physical obstacles through their online role-playing. For example, in 2008, according to a survey, 14% of males on Second Life, represented themselves as females, and 3.5% of females chose to be male avatars.\textsuperscript{32} Of course, with this sort of freedom and anonymity come the inherent dangers of purposeful misrepresentation and other possible challenges, including reports of harassment and even abuse within the virtual world of Second Life.

In 2006 a group of self-proclaimed Anglican residents of Second Life began to form. Their charter statement defined the group as “A Christian community for those who call themselves: Anglicans, Episcopalians or members of the Church of England, Episcopal Church, or any of the other bodies of believers who share the Anglican heritage.”\textsuperscript{33} In the beginning members of the group met online to interact, chat, and pray. In February 2007 a formal leadership group was formed by several of the active members of the community, and plans were conceived for the construction of a virtual church building for use by the group. A Cathedral was created between March and May 2007, modeled after the Durham Cathedral in England. As the community grew, funding was acquired in order to purchase a property, in the form of an island, for exclusive use by the Anglican Community of Second Life. The Cathedral was relocated to the new land, named “Epiphany Island,” by members of the community in June 2007. Since that time the island has been further developed to include offices for private counseling sessions and meetings with ministers and other leaders, a chapel, and other places for members to gather. The vision statement for the Cathedral and the Island, drawn up on June 16, 2007, sets the following goals for the community: “to see God glorified in Second Life; to see Christians from different countries and theological persuasions come together to serve and worship the Lord; to see the Anglican Church engage in relevant, meaningful and contemporary ways with the society around it; to offer those involved in Second Life an experience of a God who deeply loves them and seeks a relationship with them; (and) to be a community who are known for their love and care, and their preparedness to serve others.”\textsuperscript{34}

As a way of remaining in harmony with the structures of the outside, physical Anglican Communion, a ministry team was formed in July 2007. The team established a non-Eucharistic worship schedule and a daily office to include Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Compline. The team agreed that it was most responsible to refrain from

\textsuperscript{31} According to Toshiko Serenity (entry posted July 1, 2010, on the community.secondlife. general discussions forum), in July of 2010 the number of active users was estimated to be around 50,000.

\textsuperscript{32} Rymaszewski. Second Life, 86.

\textsuperscript{33} Ailsa Wright, 2009, Anglicans of Second Life — Some Reflections on Lived Experience. Paper presented for the Director of Ordinands, Anglican Diocese of Wakefield, Wakefield, United Kingdom, 12 (used by permission of the author).

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 12–13.
offering sacraments in an online environment until further theological and practical “discussions could take place.”\textsuperscript{35} Around the same time that the online services began, two leaders of the ministry group, Mark Brown (avatar name “Arkin Ariantho”) and Mike Bursell (avatar name “MikeCamel Albert”) scheduled a physical meeting with Bishop Christopher Hill of Guildford and his communications officer; the result of that meeting was the establishment of official Ecclesiastical support for the ministry of \textit{Second Life} from the Anglican Communion. Mark Brown was subsequently ordained a deacon in the Anglican Communion in Wellington, New Zealand, and licensed to minister at the Anglican Cathedral of \textit{Second Life} as part of his pastoral duties. In November 2008 Brown was ordained a priest, an action which effectively put the ministry of \textit{Second Life} under the authority of an official Anglican diocese.

Mark Brown left his position at \textit{Second Life} in June 2009, and since that time the ministry has been led by an eight-member leadership team that conducts daily services and includes the group’s founder as well as leaders of the worship services, prayer groups, and Bible Studies. Some of these are lay-led, while others are led by ordained clergy, including an ordained British Methodist minister\textsuperscript{36} who is active on the site.

Bishop Christopher Hill has continued to provide guidance and oversight for the community and has physically gathered the leaders on several occasions for discussion on the nature and theology of online church communities. There continues to be no sacramental practice at the Anglican Cathedral of \textit{Second Life}, although the Eucharist was shared physically by members of the leadership team at one of their gatherings. Bishop Hill presided, and individuals who were not able to be physically present but who were able to join with them briefly for the service through \textit{Second Life} were invited to kneel or pray during the distribution of the bread and wine.\textsuperscript{37} However, the community continues to wrestle with the question of whether or not it might at some point be feasible to offer Eucharistic services at the Anglican Cathedral of \textit{Second Life}. Paul Fiddes, who is a Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Oxford and Director of Research, Regent’s Park College, has written a very interesting short paper entitled “Sacraments in a Virtual World?”\textsuperscript{38} (http://www.docstoc.com/docs/86883542/virtual-communion) in which he argued that it is possible. In response, Bishop Christopher Hill of Guildford has written a paper entitled “Second Life and Sacraments: Anglican Observations and Guidelines.” A copy of this paper can be found at http://slangcath.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/second-life-and-sacrament-4.pdf

Were the Eucharist to be offered at the Anglican Cathedral of \textit{Second Life}, no doubt the form that action might take would have the potential to differ greatly from the examples described above. Given the nature of \textit{Second Life}, which operates in real time and utilizes human-manipulated avatars for purposes of movement, communication, and

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 17.
all other aspects of participation in a virtual world, it could be possible for an ordained
priest, functioning through an avatar, to preside over a virtual but visible Table, set with
virtual wine and virtual bread, and for a virtually gathered worshiping community of
avatars to virtually partake of those elements. This possibility raises a new set of
questions regarding the nature of presence, the role of the priest, and what it means to be
a gathered worshiping community in the context of a virtual world.

Questions to consider: Although Communion is not offered here, there are
questions that arise out of this example concerning ecclesiology. Specifically, since an
ordained clergyperson is appointed to serve this church it means that a virtual church has
been made part of a diocese. A similar effort is occurring in the United Church of Christ,
which is about to launch an online church and will call a pastor to serve it full-time. What
happens when a bishop in the UMC appoints a pastor to serve an online church? Is an
online church that is not connected to a brick-and-mortar church feasible for the UMC?
What is that appointee is a local pastor rather than an ordained elder? What are the limits
with regard to the boundaries of sacramental authority?

Central Online
See paper by Andy Langford

Many of the questions that arise in the previous example will apply to Central Online.
The proposal is that Rev. Daniel Wilson be appointed to serve the online campus. Central
is developing an app in which Communion will be offered in real-time with a pastor live
and virtually “present” with the virtually gathered worshiping community (although some
parts of the prayer of Great Thanksgiving may be pre-recorded). At this point there is no
plan for Central Online to separate from its base at Central Concord United Methodist
Church to become an independent church, but there is an expectation and plan for Central
Online to become completely self-supporting.

Dawn Chesser
Director of Preaching Ministries
General Board of Discipleship

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