

Cyberchurch [from Wikipedia]

Cyberchurch is the extension of the church universal into cyberspace. It includes different aspects of Christian community online, especially by those who view this phenomenon as a subset of emerging church, the developing expressions of the faith in relation to culture change. A cyberchurch is a ministry that exists primarily as a private website, an interactive space on a public website or social networking site.

As Internet usage continues to thrive, Christians are using websites, blogs, social networking sites, media services, chatrooms, discussion boards, and other electronic means to provide social connection, education, and enrichment of their faith.

Attempts to create online Christian communities date from the early nineties with the expansion of the Internet. The first online experiments largely mirrored more traditional versions of church, acting as extensions of religious institutions through their websites:

Cyberchurch, a 1997 book by the well-known Futurist Patrick Dixon, explored ways in which churches and individual believers were embracing web-based technologies, and correctly anticipated rapid developments over the following decade, including widespread use of video and community forums, especially by larger traditional churches who have developed global influence as a result.

Andrew Jones, an emerging church blogger, used *cyberchurch* on his blog TallSkinnyKiwi. The same word was used by web-developer Tim Bednar's paper "We Know More Than Our Pastors" which detailed the blogging movement's influence on the experience of faith. Religious pollster and author George Barna used the term in his book *Revolution* to describe "the range of spiritual experiences delivered through the Internet". Barna sees Cyberchurch as one of the future "macro-expressions" (large scale forms) of church in the future; one that will soon account for one-third of American spirituality, together with other "revolutionary" forms of church. While the term is still used for the Internet presence of religious institutions that mirror much of the forms of traditional Christianity, Jones and others advocate a definition of cyberchurch limited to the relational connections of believer wherever they are online.

Blogging

Blogging is a dominant expression of cyberchurch. Thousands of believers publish millions of articles about church, faith, God, Jesus, and more on their blogs. These blogs often reveal first person accounts of Christian experience as well as opinion pieces concerning current events, theology, happenings, and more. This presents a very personal tone to content with which readers may be able to identify. Readers can often post comments in reaction to posts or blog about content on their own blog (using a *trackback*). This level of interaction and interconnection has led to communities developing around this technology. Webs of relationships are often represented by a blog's links to other sites, sometimes called a "blogroll". Occasionally these virtual communities lead to people meeting in person and can extend or catalyze other forms of Christian community and fellowship.

Many blogs publish RSS feeds which allow their content to be syndicated to a personal newsreader or a feed aggregator. This technology downloads blog content to website or blog, a user's local computer, or to a mobile device such as a PDA or cell phone. This extends the reach of cyberspace, and with it the cyberchurch, to virtually anytime and anywhere. Large aggregating websites allow users to read content from many blogs at the same time.

Social networking sites

Christians, like many Internet users, are increasingly using social networking sites like MySpace, Xanga, and FaceBook. These sites incorporate much of the technology of blogging but forge more concrete connections between users, allowing them to "message" each other within the system, connect officially as "friends", rate and rank each other, etc. These connections may or may not materialize in the real world, but many people now consider on-line relationships a significant part of their lives, increasing the potential influence of a Christian presence in these environments. Criticism of Christian use of these sites has grown, however, due to prevalence of questionable content and issues of safety. As a result several Christian alternatives for social networking have been developed. On the other hand, some advocate a missional stance, using social networking sites and networking components of other Internet mediums like blogging, chat, and instant messaging to proselytize new converts and spread the Gospel.

There has been some speculation and experimentation with the idea of starting churches within such "virtual environments". LifeChurch.tv is attempting to plant a cyberchurch within the Facebook community using an "Internet Campus" technology. Likewise, churches are beginning to appear in the Second Life virtual world where people can attend as avatars and worship together.

On-line multimedia

Podcasting, streaming audio and video, media downloads, and self-broadcasting websites have made it possible to share the sights and sounds of belief. While religious recordings of different types have certainly existed before, it is the Internet's ability to make these files public for millions of users that has led to the growth and influence of this component of cyberchurch. Now there are millions of audio sermons, conference and seminar recordings, home videos, documentaries, faith-themed films and more accessible on the World Wide Web.

Tech-savvy blogger can use multimedia to create audioblogs and videoblogs that present experiences, opinions, dialogs, stories, and teachings, creating a more live feel to the blogging experience. Many prominent thinkers, authors, and leaders have blogs that present a podcast or streaming audio of speeches, lectures, or sermons. Video sharing sites like YouTube and Google Video allow anyone with a web camera to post video alongside professional movie religious movie producers and make it available to millions of users. This allows believers to share ideas about faith in new and creative ways. Most of these sites allow people to embed video hosted remotely onto their blog or website, powering video-based communication across the Internet. Christian-specific sites has also recently sprung up to provide faith-based video sharing services.

Interactive theological formation

Theological discourse and development has traditionally occurred through conversations and conventions limited to academic settings like seminaries and theological schools or in print as books or theological journals. Cyberchurch could be changing this as well. As theological sources have sought to use the Internet as a tool, more and more theological development is done on-line. Universities, colleges, and seminaries now offer courses that exist primarily in cyberspace, delivering class content and lectures in multimedia, video-based classrooms, discussion boards, chatrooms, and more. Likewise, many theologians now have blogs where current theological projects are discussed with input from readers who may or may not be experts or peers in the field.

Other projects have sought to move theology from its institutional settings and give the public access. Sometimes using the software term "open source", these sites offer up theological ideas to be debated by virtually anyone. Since the invention of the popular Wikipedia, some have also sought to build theological wikis; user-built and user-edited encyclopedias, whether in existing environments or theme-related sites