EXPANDING GOD’S KINGDOM ONLINE: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS
OF INTERNET CHURCHES

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Duane, who encourages me to step out and chase my dreams, who reminds me not to be afraid, and who loves me no matter what I do.

Thank you.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Expanding God’s Kingdom Online: A Rhetorical Analysis of Internet Churches

by

Erin K. Flewelling

Master of Arts in Rhetoric and Writing Studies
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In the last quarter century, research demonstrates a sharp decline in church attendance in Western nations, posing a distinct challenge to evangelical Christian faiths who believe Jesus Christ calls them into the world to expand his kingdom and make disciples. During this same time frame, global culture has become increasingly dependent on computer-mediated communication (CMC) for education, dissemination of information, and the creation or extension of social connections. The use of websites, email, and social networks has become commonplace and touches all areas of life including religion. In fact, the expansion of CMC has made new technologies available for Christians to expand the kingdom of God and to reach people around the world who have access to the Internet.

One might expect churches to utilize the Internet as an information sources, but an increasing number are establishing actual Internet congregations to create sacred space on the Internet, expand the kingdom of God, and form spiritual communities. These Internet churches function rhetorically as participants are persuaded to consider new realities about God and about humanity. This thesis examines the websites of three Internet churches, St. Pixels Church of the Internet, Potential Church, and LifeChurch.tv, in order to evaluate the goals of each church and the oral, textual, visual, and technological strategies used by these churches to achieve those goals. I will review the history of the Internet church movement as well as some of the implications of this trend. Next, I ask how it is that these churches establish construct a sense of trustworthiness, an essential element in persuasion. Finally, I explore the role of sensory elements such as sound and images, combined with textual elements, in constructing a sense of space for Internet church participants, in order to examine the way this construction of space communicates the values of these Internet churches.
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My thesis is done, and all I have left is to write is an acknowledgment page. I've been sitting in front of my computer for the last thirty minutes trying to adequately recognize the many individuals who have helped me in my pursuit of a Master's Degree. Honestly, I've been thinking about this page for nearly a year, trying to figure out how to thank those who have influenced my love of words and who have challenged me to seek answers to my many questions.

The problem is that I don't know where to start or how to fit this on a single page. It's probably not possible to thank everyone, and I hesitate to start naming names for fear that I will leave someone out. I probably don't need to worry. It's not like they'll all read this page anyway.

I want to begin by thanking my mom and dad for encouraging my natural love for language and learning. Every Saturday, when I was little, my dad gave me fifty cents, and we went to the bookstore and I bought a new book. I don't know what other kids did with their allowance, but I wanted books. My dad seemed to like that. I never went anywhere without a book, and my dad seemed to like that too. My dad's gone now, but I know he would be incredibly proud of his little girl who has grown up to become a teacher and a writer and an academic.

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I am grateful for all the people God has placed in my life. No accomplishment is every achieved independently. I could not have finished this project on my own.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On May 7, 2011, Oklahoma City’s LifeChurch.tv began a sermon series titled “Past Your Past,” in which lead pastor Craig Groeschel focused on the ways past life experiences have the power the hold people captive. On Saturday, May 21, I attended services from my living room in San Diego, watching on my laptop as part of the Church Online congregation. On that date, Groeschel explained that God can—and wants to—heal damaged relationships. To support his claim, he read an account from the book of Matthew\(^1\) in which Jesus instructed his followers to reconcile broken relationships. Groeschel urged me—and the rest of the Church Online congregation—to go to people hurt through our words or actions and apologize to them. Groeschel gave specific instructions for these apologies, encouraging us to admit to specific actions and attitudes. He warned us against making excuses for their behavior, told us to accept the consequences for our actions, and instructed us to stop making the same mistakes. At the close of the sermon, he looked straight into a camera, appearing to speak directly to me and all the other Church Online participants, and urged each of us to put what we had heard into action. He said, “But you’re going to go and you’re going to do what the Bible says, and you’re going to own up to your part.” He continued, “And you can’t control the response, but you’re going to trust God with the other person. And I’ve been praying all week long that God would take that which is broken and heal it. And it would be stronger than it ever has been.”

He prayed and then addressed us again, asking us to commit to the reconciliation process. He said, “All of our different churches, those of you who would say, ‘That’s me. I’ve got some apologizing to do. I want to apologize with integrity. I want to do my part and believe that God can take something that’s broken and make it whole and healed again.’ If that’s you today, all of our churches, would you lift up your hands right now? Just lift them

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\(^1\) Matthew 5:23-24, New International Version.
up high. Just say, yes, that’s me.” As he gazed into the camera, looking into my eyes, he raised both hands again. And again.

At the time of the recording, Groeschel spoke to a crowded auditorium; now, he speaks directly to me—and all of Church Online. He said, “There are tons and tons of hands going up, and God, I thank you for those today, who recognize their part. God, I know that it’s complicated, but . . . we just surrender ourselves. We humble ourselves before you, honoring your word, and God, we will love and value the relationships even more than we love being right. . . . God, I pray that there would be healing and there would be restoration.”

Below the video box, the graphic image of a raised hand appeared. The text in a blue banner next to the hand read, "I will do my part for reconciliation.” In order to signify a response, Church Online participants can click on the raised hand, and a numeral signals the numbers of clicks. First one click, and then two, and finally, at this service, ten clicks (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Responding to the sermon. Adapted from Church Online May 21, 2011 6:47 p.m. PST.
Groeschel continued, this time asking people to seek reconciliation with God. He said, “There are many of you, if you are really, really honest, at the deepest part of your heart today, you’re going to recognize—you’re not in a relationship with God. What do you do? The very same thing we talked about today. God, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’ve sinned against you. Will you forgive me?” The text box below him asked participants to raise their hands to signal, “I surrender my life to God.” This time six people in the Church Online audience raised their hands. Afterwards, in a separate video, Church Online Campus Pastor Brandon Donaldson congratulated those who made this decision and said the church has “put together some great next steps . . . to help . . . in [starting a] relationship with Jesus.” He urged these people to click on the link below, which would take them to a “What’s Next Kit.” He urged anyone without a Bible to click on a separate link to get a free Bible (see Figure 2).

Every week Groeschel challenges his Internet church to respond in some way. In order for them to do so, participants must accept a unique view of the world, one that Church
Online constructs for them, through music, video, interaction with other participants, and teaching. And every week, people respond, clicking on images of the raised hand. During the week of August 28, 2010, more than 1000 people clicked on that hand, 10,000 people logged on for a Church Online experience, and a record number of individuals asked to receive a What’s Next Kit (“Big News”).

In “The Rhetorical Situation,” published in 1968, Lloyd F. Bitzer defines rhetoric as “a mode of altering reality . . . by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action” (4). Bitzer explains this reality transformation, stating, “The rhetoric alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes a mediator of change. In this sense, rhetoric is also persuasive” (4). The Internet churches studied in this thesis engage in this type of rhetoric, constructing a new reality with a God who speaks through the Christian Bible, desires a relationship with humanity, and has certain expectations of his followers.

In my offline church experiences, I have seen people respond, raise hands, go forward to the altar, seek repentance and reconciliation; I have seen lives transformed as individuals begin to embrace new realities about God and life. However, as I watch Church Online, I wonder who is clicking on the raised hand and why? Are these individuals curious as to what will happen when they click, or have they truly been persuaded to respond? I wonder what they will do when they walk away from the computer screen. Will they approach people they have hurt and ask forgiveness? Will they spend some time on the provided links? Will they request a free Bible? Will they read it? Do they accept the realities constructed by Church Online? And will these online realities manifest themselves in their offline lives? Can Church Online really “make a lasting difference” in individual lives, in communities, and in the world? ("LifeChurch.tv 2010 Annual Report"). Can it really lead “people to become fully devoted followers of Christ,” the stated goal of LifeChurch.tv’s Church Online? ("Who We Are").

In his article titled “The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace,” Lorne Dawson anticipates these types of doubts, noting, “In every case, I surmise, research will be guided by the suspicion that the conspicuous reflexivity induced by doing things in cyberspace runs counter to religious authenticity” (28). Timothy Hutchings notes that early Christian responses expressed these same doubts, and “drew heavily on assumptions
regarding the importance of face-to-face meeting, the nature of online community, the
efficacy of the Internet as a medium for proselytism and the effects of the Internet on
authority and accountability” (243)  I initially approached this research project with same
skepticism detailed by Dawson and Hutchings, wondering if Internet churches can evoke
what Dawson describes as “an experience of the real sacred, which usually entails contact
with a power assumed to be external to the religious actor” (29).  After spending time in
these churches, however, I recognize that they can indeed construct new realities and that
individuals do respond to these new realities.  These Internet churches function rhetorically,
and participants are persuaded to think differently and to change the way they live because of
these new realities.  My questions have changed, and now I ask what rhetorical strategies
these churches employ to create the new realities.

Church Online is associated with LifeChurch.tv, a multisite evangelical Christian
congregation with thirteen physical locations, also known as campuses.  The church relies
heavily on technology to expand its reach from headquarters in Oklahoma City to locations
throughout Oklahoma, Texas, New York, Tennessee, and Florida.  Although most elements
of services at their physical campuses are “live and in person,” the teaching portion is a live
feed from the Oklahoma City campus or a prerecorded video segment, depending on the
service time.  LifeChurch’s large staff also produces high-quality supplementary videos,
artwork, and curriculum.  They offer these resources to other churches free of charge through
an open source site created by the church.  LifeChurch was also one of the first churches to
venture into the Internet campus world with the launch of services on Easter 2006.  This
allows them to extend their message anywhere on the planet with an Internet connection.  In
her introduction to *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, cultural
anthropologist Birgit Meyer acknowledges this shift in religious practice, stating that as
“electronic and digital media have become more easily available” (xi), this has opened up
new “possibilities for religious groups to assert their public presence and to appeal to new
audiences” (xi).

In his early research on religion on the Internet, sociologist Christopher Helland
differentiated between “online religion,” which provides “religious information and not
interaction,” and “religion online” (27), which allows participants to interact with one
another, engaging in discussions as well as religious activities.  Internet churches facilitate
this kind of interaction. Futurist Patrick Dixon describes an Internet Church as a “body [of] Christians who interact using global computer networks” (17). It is “an electronically linked group of believers, aiming to reproduce in cyberspace aspects of conventional church life” (17). Researcher Tim Hutchings defines them as “Internet-based Christian groups using a wide range of digital media to pursue a range of key religious goals” (63), including worship, preaching, building friendships, debating issues, offering mutual support, and proselytizing.

Certainly, the Internet is a great informational tool, and the proliferation of Christian websites telling about specific religions is not surprising, given Jesus’ mandate to create disciples; however, the actual practice of religion on the Internet, the idea that people can experience the sacred, encounter God on the Internet, and form spiritual connections with God and each other, raises a host of questions. In his Leadership Journal article, Chad Hall describes several Internet churches and suggests that “With any new movement, it is wise to ask questions and probe the underlying values, theology, and implications . . . virtual churches force us to rethink long-held assumptions about what church is, the impact of technology on the soul, and what it really means in a spiritual community” (47). In The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture, pastor and author Shane Hipps explores issues important to Christian leaders considering venturing into cyberspace and wonders:

What happens when . . . complex media are infused into the life of a church or into the lives of people who are in the church? What is the effect of the Internet on the way we think about and do church? How does the medium . . . shape our understanding of community, leadership, and mission? In what ways is our understanding of the gospel altered when we communicate or preach with pictures instead of words? (22)

Hipps introduces Marshall McLuhan’s claim the “media is the message” to argue that methods of communication will modify the way messages are perceived. Brenda Brasher expresses a similar claim in Give Me That Online Religion and narrows the discussion, stating, “The question is not whether but how and when religious traditions and religious organizations will change and be changed by involvement in the online world (xiv).

Until recently, the academic community has largely overlooked these concerns expressed by Hipps and Brasher. In their introduction to Religion Online, Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan, sociologists who focus on religious studies, note that despite the growing research on computer-mediated communication and the proliferation of religion on the web,
the study of religion online “suffered from relative neglect when compared with the
burgeoning literature on the medical, political, educational, and even sexual uses and
consequences of the Internet” (9). Professor of religion and culture at Wilfred Laurier
University, Ronald L. Grimes, offers a potential cause for the absence of research and
suggests that until recently “the terms ritual and media would have been regarded as labels
for separate cultural domains—the one sacred, the other secular; the one term designating a
religious activity and other denoting tools for transferring information” (219). However, he
suggests this mindset has changed as definitions for these terms have been modified in more
recently years, and as a result, “the connections between them are remarked upon with
growing frequency in scholarly writing” (219). Dawson and Cowan recall that the first truly
empirical studies intended to explore and understand religious practices online were
published in the late 1990s. Commenting on the absence of scholarship in 2005, Dawson
declares, “Clearly, virtual manifestations of religious practice . . . warrant more study,
particularly as they proliferate” (28).

Dawson and Cowan suggest that as “the social-scientific study of the Internet begins
to mature . . . it is becoming increasingly apparent that scholars of religion need to address
some basic questions” (10):

1. Who is using the Internet for religious purposes, how, and why?
2. What is “the nature and quality of people’s experiences doing things online”?
3. What are “the relationships between religious activities offline and online”?
4. How is the Internet “being used to engage in such things as prayer, meditation, ritual,
education, and organizational tasks”?
5. What “features of technology . . . are being utilized in the service of religious ends”
and what are the “potential implications” of this use?
6. Are “the technological and cultural aspects of the Internet . . . better suited to the
advancement of one style or type of religion over another” and why? (10-11)

These avenues of research have prompted additional questions. Heidi Campbell, professor of
communication at Texas A&M University, asks, “Can a group of people, who gather solely
through email, truly be regarded as a community? Can online relationships be as authentic as
interactions taking place in a local church? What is community? What is church?”
(Exploring xiv). Meyer continues this discussion on the formation of religious community
and draws on nineteenth-century French sociologist Emile Durkheim’s question, “What are
the bonds which unite men one with another?” (3). She wonders about the role played by things and media in the actual process of community making (6) and asks how “religious groups negotiate new . . . media and the formats, styles, and possibilities” (12).

As a student of rhetoric, however, I ask a different set of questions. Evangelical Internet churches, like the one at Church Online, function rhetorically, calling for participants to make real-world decisions, such as the ones described earlier in this chapter. Internet church leaders attempt to evangelize, to persuade people to become Christians. They want to persuade Internet church participants to form community, to live according to biblical principles, and to get involved in various Christian activities including evangelism. Aristotle defined rhetoric as “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (37). As mentioned previously, Bitzer expands the Aristotelian definition to include “discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action” (4). This is an important expansion when evaluating the rhetoric of Internet churches for these organizations want to construct new realities about God and the meaning of life, and they want to persuade participants to think and live according to these new realities. Anastasia Karaflogka claims, “Religious discourse in cyberspace can take many different forms” (282). As a result, my questions explore the rhetorical strategies used to construct these realities, examining not only the new realities constructed by Internet churches, but also the various forms of religious discourse used on Internet churches.

Stefano Pace notes that these issues are interesting because “[r]eligious movements are increasingly aware of modern communication styles and apply them” (1), and as a result, this kind of study expands knowledge about other kinds of communication. Second, he asserts that “religious forces are one of the most relevant drivers of social structure and change.” Therefore, “scholars of communication should . . . try to understand this topic” (2). Dawson confirms the need for this kind of work and calls for “true qualitative studies of virtual ritual.” suggesting that a “semiotic or rhetorical analysis of virtual rituals or services could prove most enlightening” (28).

In “Rhetorical Criticism of Public Discourse on the Internet: Theoretical Implications,” published in 1998, Barbara Warnick acknowledges challenges in attempting rhetorical analysis of computer-mediated communication. She notes, “The malleability of the text, the indeterminacy of authorship, and the changing natures of community, audience,
and public in new communication environments surely complicate the critic’s task” (“Public” 74). At the same time, she acknowledges the rhetorical nature of the work done online and notes these “communicators . . . support values and ideologies, influence one another, and shape beliefs and attitudes.” As such, they work to persuade. For that reason, she urges the adaption of theories of rhetorical analysis in order to accommodate the “modality and environment of new communication technologies” (“Public” 74).

This thesis examines the rhetoric of online evangelical Christian churches, adapting existing theories of rhetorical analysis in order to understand how persuasion functions in this online environment. Their primary purpose is first of all to connect men and women to God, and secondarily to connect adherents to each other so that they form supportive spiritual community. Campbell notes that the formation of these types of communities is essential since “the Christian church represents a meeting place of two communities, the divine community and the human community” (Exploring 30). This formation of community relies on the interactive nature of religion online and allows parishioners to worship, pray, and learn together even though they have never met in person.

When I started this project, I focused on the verbal rhetoric of Internet churches, including both oral and textual elements of the Internet church, and certainly much of what has been written about these churches has focused on what they say and what they write. Over time, however, I began to see that it is impossible to understand what the churches are doing to connect participants with God and with each other without also considering visual elements, the layout of the screen, images, and videos. In her early work discussing rhetorical criticism of public discourse on the Internet, Warnick observed, “Mere attention to words on a web page will not suffice, since the images are so important to textual meaning. Even in texts without images, the way that the text is displayed on the screen has rhetorical impact (“Public” 76).” At the same time, it’s important not to forget the verbal content. In her 2003 article discussing digital writing environments, Mary E. Hocks reminds us that new media literacies create hybrid forms of communication and claims “we need a better understanding of the increasing visual and interactive rhetorical features of digital documents” (631).

As part of my research, I “attended” three virtual churches, two on October 31, 2009, and another one on November 3, 2009. Since that time, I have returned on multiple
occasions, listened to sermons, and observed and documented interactions between church participants. Part of my research has included recording and transcribing sermons. These three churches represent three basic Internet church types:

- **Internet Exclusive Churches** exist only in the virtual world. St. Pixels is a truly virtual church with no physical campus. This church originated in the United Kingdom, but it also has leaders and participants from the United States and Canada. The church offers services daily at 2:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. GMT.

- **Live Stream Churches** offer complete services on the Internet in real time, adding technologies that allow participants to interact during the service. The Live Stream format limits the number of services offered. Flamingo Road Church, a multisite church with five physical campuses, three near Miami, one in Pensacola, and one in Lima, Peru. The church is now known as Potential Church.

- **Dynamic Prerecorded Churches** combine prerecorded elements with live interaction by participants. Because participants experience and respond to the service together, services feel like they are real-time. The Dynamic Prerecorded format allows churches to offer services at multiple times throughout the week. Lifechurch.tv, a multisite church with eight physical sites in Oklahoma as well as campuses in Arizona, Florida, New York, Tennessee, and Texas, is a Dynamic Prerecorded Church and offers more than 40 services during the week.²,³

To begin this study and to give context for the rhetorical analyses to follow, I will begin with descriptions of the churches I studied. Edward Lee Lamoureux identifies a significant challenge in the study of churches like the one I have described. He notes that “Research and print publication cycles inevitably create considerable gaps between daily ‘reality’ and published analysis” (341). In the approximately 18 months I have observed these three churches, they have all incorporated multiple changes. As a result, I will describe my initial observations and then reflect on some changes I observed in subsequent visits.

After providing context, I will review a history of the Internet church movement and some of the multidisciplinary research surrounding the study of virtual churches in order to

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² Some religious websites allow visitors to view or listen to podcasts of sermons. Similarly, some churches stream their services, and others offer prerecorded sermons or portions of services. However, if they offer sermons (information) only and do not reproduce interactive elements of “conventional church life” such as the ability to build friendships or offer mutual support, they do not fit Helland’s criteria of “religion online.” Therefore, I do not identify them as Internet churches.

³ There is a fourth type of Internet church not studied in this thesis. These are Virtual World Churches, which exist on sites such as Second Life or Alpha World. Douglas Estes provides descriptions of these churches in his book, listed in the Works Cited of this thesis. Stefan Gelgren, Nadia Miczek, and Tim Hutchings are all doing work on this type of church.
build a foundation for a rhetorical analysis of these churches. In the final chapters, I focus on two rhetorical issues, exploring ways Internet churches utilize a hybrid discourse including oral and written verbal messages, combined with images and technological affordances to persuade site visitors to embrace new realities. First, I explore the ways Internet churches construct *ethos*. What makes these churches credible? Aristotelian *ethos* studies the way a speaker establishes a trustworthy identity through his or her speech. Internet church websites rely on multiple factors to establish trustworthiness. I examine some of these factors, focusing on the way technological design has the potential to establish *ethos*. Next, I examine the structure of the websites from an architectural framework. In what ways does the construction of space on these websites communicate the theology of an Internet church?

I should note that I have spent my entire life attending evangelical Christian churches. In addition, I spent four years working for a church, assisting the pastoral team to plan and create worship services. In order to do this, I spent time researching other churches, in particular, their self-characterizations on websites. I also spent time researching different church trends related to church growth. This personal background helps me understand some of the nuances of Internet church services and gives me the ability to compare virtual churches to more traditional brick-and-mortar churches and to understand the expectations Christians have of their churches. This topic intrigues former coworkers at Newbreak Church as well as Christian friends. They will immediately begin comparing Internet church practices with their experiences in traditional churches. However, I have attempted to address a broad audience that may be less familiar with evangelical churches. As a result, I provide descriptions and explanations for phenomena I have observed while studying Internet churches.

**INTERNET EXCLUSIVE CHURCH: ST. PIXELS CHURCH OF THE INTERNET**

Randall Kluver and Yanli Chen observe that, like many Western European nations, Britain has largely become secularized, and that attendance is quite low. However, “a substantially majority still profess[ed] adherence to some mixture of traditional Christian beliefs” (117). In May 2004, the Methodist Church of Britain launched Church of Fools, an experimental three-dimensional virtual church that allowed online worshipers to “choose a
cartoon-like avatar in which to participate in worship services” (Kluver and Chen 116) conducted in stone cathedral (see Figure 3). Given the wide use of the Internet in the United Kingdom, the launch of Church of Fools “was an attempt to create a new locus for worship, outside the traditional trappings of church life” (117), and to “bring an online church experience not to those who were already involved in religious activities, but rather to reach those who were unlikely physical to visit a church” (117). As mentioned previously, the Church of Fools “closed its doors” after four months, but Kluver and Chen recall that “the community that developed out of the experience was unwilling to let the attempt die” (116). Douglas Estes, author of SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World, notes that the people who attended the church “passionately petitioned” (56) its leaders to keep the church open. Despite that, services ended because of financial problems, and the website was left up as “sacred space.” Members of the church requested that the creators of Church of Fools create a new church, and so St. Pixels began. Estes notes that even before it became a church, it had more than 1500 members, and he claims that the community is still growing. Unlike Flamingo Road Church or LifeChurch.tv, there is no physical location where people can attend; this is a truly virtual church, existing only in cyberspace.

Figure 3. Church of Fools. Adapted from http://churchoffools.com/view-clips/lp_536.html.

I logged on to St. Pixels on Saturday, October 31, 2009, not sure what to expect. I definitely did not predict the low-tech site resembling websites from mid 90s. A gray header
on the top with white dot matrix font identified the site as “St. Pixels Church of the Internet.”
Still-life avatar faces graced the left side of the page. These low-tech cartoon figures allowed parishioners to choose hair color and style, eye color, and nose shape (see Figure 4). The center of the web page included text describing the church. In addition, there were links to blogs written by church members. I needed to search multiple pages for site options; the website wasn’t user friendly.

Figure 4. St. Pixels’ Avatars.

On one page, I read a description of the site:

Imagine church with no cobwebs, wooden pews, hymnbooks, overhead projector, leaking roof, organ fund... or even church building. That's where you are right now. Welcome to St Pixels, the online church where you can meet others, talk about serious and not-so-serious stuff, discuss what you do and don't believe, go to regular services, and join a pioneering worldwide community. (“St. Pixels”) I was required to register in order to enter the site, which I did. When I logged in, I learned that 276 people had accessed the site in the last month. This number wasn’t even close to Estes’ claim of 1500. I clicked on the “live” option and entered a chat room with a floor plan of an Anglican church on the right. By clicking on a room, I could choose to stand in a hallway, enter the sanctuary, go into a prayer room, or walk into the bar. A numeral next to the text identified the number of people in each room. I could see that four other people stood in the hallway, and so I chose that option. They greeted me immediately after I entered, typing in messages. I told them why I was there, that I was a graduate student doing research on virtual churches. I entered the sanctuary. This, too, was a chat room. There
were no images, and the room was empty. I returned to the hallway and began talking to the people waiting there. I learned that one person lived in Tennessee, one lived in Canada, and the other two lived in the United Kingdom. Mini, who was from the United Kingdom, told me her mother had just died and the viewing had been that day. She told the group that the funeral would be held on Sunday. I found out when the next service would be and planned to return on November 2, 2009, at 6:00 a.m. Monday morning (2:00 p.m. UK time).

There were six people present when I returned to St. Pixels early Monday morning. Mini was in attendance, and she remembered me. She let me know that Grolp, the facilitator, would be late, and that the service would start at 6:30 instead of 6:00. Grolp had led a service in the real world and had to delay services. She arrived a few minutes later, but after greeting all of us, she excused herself to do laundry.

The website had been silent every time I had logged on, but now I heard Grolp’s voice upon entering the sanctuary. There was organ music, and I could see a small image related to the discussion in the right-hand corner of the page. The liturgical service included responsive readings and classical music. Together, we were cued to respond to the readings with capital letters, and we typed the response into the text box. Oddly enough, perhaps because this service was so very different than the contemporary Christian services I normally attend, or perhaps because it created “new methods” of worship for me, this service felt the most “real” of the three services I attended. I was a little sad, thinking that I would probably not return, and I wondered how Mini would deal with the loss of her mother.

I returned a year later, on December 12, 2010. I went into the sanctuary, where ten people had gathered for the next service. Once again, the people in attendance were very friendly. I told them I was in San Diego, and we discussed the 80-degree weather in San Diego and the cold temperature and ice in the UK. The moderator indicated she had visited San Diego once about 20 years ago and told me she loved Balboa Park. She told the group that she would be going on vacation to an island in the United Kingdom, and she posted an Internet picture of the island so I could see it (Figure 5).

Eight people attended the Sunday evening Advent service. I returned again on December 13, 2010 and attended another service. This was led by a different moderator.
I explored the site after the service. The website no longer included information about the number of people logging on each month, but other than that, I saw no changes in the eleven months since I began my research. 4

LIVE STREAM CHURCH: FLAMINGO ROAD CHURCH, NOW KNOWN AS POTENTIAL CHURCH

In an article for Leadership Journal, Chad Hall interviewed Pastor Brian Vasil, who oversees the Internet campus of Flamingo Road Church (FRC) near Miami. Vasil claims their Internet campus shares the same goals as the physical campuses and states:

We want to help people take steps toward Christ. We do not want them to just consume good teaching, but to engage and connect. Many people hear of Internet campus and think it must be pretty passive—people sitting in their pajamas watching a video. But we have leveraged technology to provide a chat room where worshippers mingle and talk with one another and with me, their campus pastor. (Hall 47)

4 St. Pixels has changed significantly since its launch as Church of Fools, and it is not done changing. On May 10, 2011, it will launch the very first interactive church on Facebook.
In essence, the Internet church serves as means of spreading the Gospel. FRC leaders hope that this experience will not merely be informative, but that worship participants will actively respond to the presentation, through interacting with other worshipers and the pastor. In other words, their goal is “religion online” as opposed to “online religion.”

Prompted by Leadership Journal’s article, I began exploring their website on October 31, 2009, a Saturday afternoon. At 4:42 p.m., I clicked on the Internet Campus link and was immediately connected to a real-time Saturday evening service that had begun at 7:30 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. I viewed the service on a 2 x 4 inch insert on the screen. There was no option to view the service full screen. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I had the option to connect to a chat room and engage with people as I watched the service. For the next eight minutes, I watched an ethnically diverse worship band lead the congregation in a number of familiar up-tempo songs. A box at the bottom of the screen displayed song lyrics. The band included singers, a saxophone, electric and acoustic guitars, bass, and drums. The band members were active, moving, and dancing. The cameras used a variety of angles, widescreen, close up on various instruments, often including the congregation in shots. A screen behind the band showed a variety of images, mostly blue sky and white fluffy clouds. The streaming video froze several times despite broadband reception.

I clicked on a few links as I watched or listened to music portion of the service. One showed a world map with country outlines. Red dots signaled countries where people had logged on to the church site. I could see that there were people watching the Internet service in Ghana, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Japan, the United Kingdom, China, all across the United States, and a few countries in South America. Another link sent me to a “connection card” that allowed me to let them know I was watching, provide an email address, and tell them how I found their Internet campus. I let them know that I was a graduate student researching virtual churches.

I clicked back on the service as the worship leader began to pray. It was odd to see the speaker close his eyes. The sound cut out, and the screen cut away to a video. A rapid collage of images and words flashed across the screen. “Lies. Adultery.” I saw multiple film clips, book and magazine covers, photos. Finally, the title of the speaker’s series rested on the screen for a moment: “Tempted: Sex, Lies and Adultery.”
The lead teaching pastor, Troy Gramling, welcomed “all the people at all the campuses and online.” He said, “It’s cool that we get to do church together.” He announced a web exclusive to be shown on Sunday at 8:00 p.m. Gramling had short blonde hair and a goatee. He was wearing a gray v-neck sweater with a t-shirt underneath and a pair of jeans. This is a casual atmosphere. The screen behind him shows the words to Scripture passages he reads from the Bible. As he spoke, it appears that the screen behind him wrote out his notes.

I had an option to take notes on an outline provided through the website, and if I provided an email address, I would get a copy of my notes sent to me. The service ended after an hour and 15 minutes. Gramling closed in prayer, and then ushers took up an offering at the physical campus. During the offering, I watched another video, advertising the Sunday evening web exclusive. Afterwards, the video cut away from the main service and a man came on the screen and identified himself as Brian Vasil, the Internet campus pastor. He thanked viewers for attending the Internet service and reminded us that we could request prayer. He repeated the ad for the November 1, Internet-only service at 8:00 p.m. and invited viewers to “partner with online giving all over the planet.” He noted that this was the two-year anniversary of the Internet campus, and that since the inception of the Internet campus, 100 people had committed their life to Christ online and there had been 50 baptisms.5

I received an auto-reply note in my email in-box in response to the connection card I had filled out online and then received a personalized email from the Internet pastor about ten minutes after the service ended. He asked about the focus of my research and offered to help with anything if he could. I felt very welcomed and valued. Despite this initial sense of welcome from the online community, I had a hard time paying attention through the service. The experience felt distant, like I was looking in on something happening far away. FRC’s

5 A YouTube video dated February 17, 2008 depicts the Internet Campus’ first Internet baptism by means of webcam technology. Vasil and Gramling pray in Florida as a Alyssa, a Georgia woman, and two friends and a small child watch and listen in a bathroom. Gramling thanks God “for technology and the cool things we can do . . .” After the prayer, Alyssa climbs into a bathtub. Her friend Lisa acts as Vasil’s “hands,” lowering Alyssa under the water and lifting her out as Vasil pronounces, “. . . it is my honor to baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Afterwards, a roomful of people in Florida applauds along with the small gathering in the bathroom.
stated goal is to create an interactive worship service, but the experience felt very passive for me. My initial thought was that this might be a great church to attend in person, but I wouldn’t want to attend another virtual service. A form email from the directors of online community, received the following Wednesday, invited me to attend a physical campus, which seemed impractical since I live in San Diego, and the church is in Florida. The Internet service seemed designed to recruit people to attend one of their Florida sites rather than to involve me in an active online community.

FRC was the first virtual church service I had ever visited, and I wondered if perhaps my unfavorable observations reflected my initial skepticism regarding virtual churches. I returned on Saturday, February 19, 2011. Flamingo Road Church is now known as Potential Church, presumably because not all its campuses are on Flamingo Road. I logged on five minutes prior to the designated start of the service and registered. However, the service did not automatically come on and I had to log off and then back on to view the service. The presentation actually began fifteen minutes prior to the start of the service, and a man and a woman in the church stood in the church lobby, welcoming online visitors to the church (see Figure 6). They explained how to use the chat and encouraged asking questions about the sermon. They also informed guests that the church would be taking communion during the service and suggested that guests get a piece of bread and some juice in order to participate. The image was grainy and the sound was distorted to the point I had difficulty understanding. The woman’s microphone went in and out so that sometimes I could hear her and other times I couldn’t. The service began with energetic music, singers jumping up and down, clapping, flashing lights, and a full band. The harmonies were slightly off key. Just as it had when I logged on a year before, the image continued to freeze frequently, and I gave up and planned to attend another time for a full service. I was curious about how to lead an Internet church in communion. I found the chat easily this time, but it frequently dropped users, who logged on over and over.6 Some of the people in the chat section had “host” in

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6 I returned to the site for additional research on May 1, 2011. The chat section on the Potential Church website now uses Facebook profiles now and anything I type shows up as a random status report on my wall. I see real names and faces on the chat, which makes this seem more personal, but may pose privacy concerns for some participants. However, no one gets dropped from the chat.
parentheses after their names, and these hosts greeted each person who logged on. The participants on the chat seemed to know each other and several offered reasons why they were not physically in church. No one asked about the sermon. The website no longer includes the map option, but there are options to watch a Spanish translation, a children’s service, or a service for teenagers.

Because I had logged onto an unfamiliar Wi-Fi connection, I wondered if perhaps some of the technical difficulties might be due to a weak signal. Therefore, I returned to Potential Church on Saturday, March 12, 2011. The screen froze less frequently, but the images on the screen still lacked clarity. The worship music at the beginning of the service was noticeably off key. It can be difficult to get a good sound mix with live music. After an extended announcement from the lead pastor regarding Easter services and a discussion of prayer, in particular for the victims of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami, the pastor invited the church to hold hands, even extending across the aisles.
Throughout the sermon, the pastor spoke directly to people at the physical campuses:

- “If you’re a broke college student, if you’re in the room or at one of our campuses, just give a shout out.”
- “You all complain about walking across the parking lot in the hot weather to get to church.”

My experience seemed less passive this time, but watching on the West Coast, far from Florida, with a distorted image, a freezing screen, and references to the people in the room, they were in one place, and I was in another. Like before, I felt very much like a watcher rather than a participant engaged in worship with an Internet congregation.

**Dynamic Prerecorded Church: Lifechurch.tv**

I logged onto the home page of Lifechurch.tv on October 31, 2009. A countdown clock greeted me and indicated I had 12 minutes and 47 seconds before the next service started. I was already familiar with Lifechurch.tv because of some research on multisite churches I had done in 2006 while working for a church. Multisite churches essentially franchise a church, allowing a church to meet in multiple locations, also known as campuses. As part of multisite development, LifeChurch became one of the first churches to show video teaching at multisite campuses. This strategy allowed them to “plant” physical campuses not only in Oklahoma, but also in Texas, New York, Arizona, and Tennessee. Their large staff produce high quality supplementary videos, artwork, and curriculum which they offer free of charge along with sermon outlines and use of sermon videos free of charge at www.openlifechurch.tv. Lifechurch.tv was one of the first to venture into the Internet campus world with the launch of services on Easter 2007. In his *Leadership Journal* (Fall 2009) article titled “Church Virtually,” Chad Hall notes, “they set into motion a movement that has allowed them to reach people anywhere on the planet with an Internet connection” (48).

Hall interviewed Bobby Gruenewald, Pastor of Innovational Leadership, notes that they reach about 5,000 people per week through 22 scheduled “online experiences” (Hall 48) and observes that Gruenewald “admits that exact numbers are hard to determine, but reports that each week there are over 50,000 unique IP addresses logging in, with roughly one in ten staying for the entire service” (48). The church continues to grow, and Tim Hutchings, who has done extensive research on LifeChurch.tv’s Internet church notes that in 2009, 1.2
million different computers logged onto 980 different Church Online “Experiences” (11). Gruenewald says, “Our desire is to leverage technology to connect people to Christ, to each other, and to their community” (Hall 48). Their eventual goal is to have services available 24 hours per day in multiple languages. Once again, the goal aligns with Helland’s concept of “religion online” and the desire of LifeChurch.tv’s leadership that participants join together in connecting to God. Each element of the service works together to ask participants to respond in some physical way, extending beyond the Internet.

The website of Lifechurch.tv was far more interesting than the one at the Flamingo Road Church. At the top, I saw links connecting me to information about the church, its beliefs, locations, and activities. At the center of the page, I saw a framed image representing the current sermon series, “Ghost.” A black background highlighted gold-white electric lighting in the shape of a ghost or angel, with a head, wings, and flared bottom. I read the title, “GHOST” in black capital letters across the electrical figure (see Figure 7). In smaller font, at the right-hand corner of the lights, I read “The Ghost” in smaller white font. And then below that, I read “The spirit of life . . . the essence of truth . . . the voice of God. He has always been here, and will always remain. And when you are alone, lost, and afraid, He will carry you home.” In blue font below that, I read, “Come explore the power and comfort of the one who resides within . . . The Ghost.” This was a link connecting me to their Internet service.

I still had about ten minutes to go before the service began. Again, the viewing screen was small. The right-hand side of the page contained a chat screen. Already some people had gathered together and were talking. The conversations seemed random, so I began exploring the LifeChurch.tv website. As with the Flamingo Road Church site, I had an option to see a map showing the different countries logged into the service. This time they listed the countries by name. All continents (except Antarctica) were represented.

I clicked on the Church Online newsletter and read that members of the Internet campus are putting together LifePacks, “packages they give to people in need that contain basic necessities,” things I think someone in my community may need. If I chose to, I could click on a link and request large clear plastic zip lock bags with a LifeChurch logo on them,
fill them up with items to help meet basic needs, and then give them away in my community, or I could send school supplies to the office in Oklahoma City, and the office staff would fill bags and send them to a school in Pakistan.

The church service began with music. Below the screen of the service, text informed that Trent Austin, Marcy Priest, and Brad Stone were leading worship today. I had links that allowed me to connect with Marcy or Brad on Twitter. Like FRC, Church Online’s band played up-tempo contemporary worship music. Embedded song lyrics on the screen emphasized the Christian message of the songs. The first song was written by a popular Christian recording artist, Charlie Hall, and graphics for the album cover were in the text box below the viewing screen. I had an option to “visit Charlie Hall’s MySpace, website, last.fm, or buy song.”

Another text box offered me opportunities to go to email, Twitter, Facebook, Stumble Upon, Delicious, or Digg. I could click on “live prayer” and send in a prayer request, or I could send in a question and get an answer by email.

Like the band at Flamingo Road Church, the band moved constantly. The electric guitar player jumped up and down rhythmically. All band members dressed casually in jeans.
and t-shirts. Again, the camera operators used different camera angles and focused on different band members.

I redirected my attention to the chat box. Like most chat rooms, there were many conversations going on. Frank and a participant who identified himself as “Woot woot” used clichéd Christian phrases and “sang along” with the music, typing in phrases of the song. Bobby wrote, “I need love.” “Hola” wrote, “How to contact a girl pretty.” Chats were translated from original languages, and so we could speak with participants who wrote in Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese. A few people asked serious questions about the sermon and about God, and I identified a couple of administrators who responded to these individuals.

After the music ended, Brandon Donaldson spoke to Church Online participants and invited them to hand out the Life Packs I had read about previously on the website. He also suggested that participants could support the ministry of LifeChurch.tv and appeared to point up from the video box to a link on the web page. He also informed participants they could follow along with the service on their mobile phones.

Craig Groeschel is the lead teaching pastor at LifeChurch.tv. The sermon began with a video showing a country road with falling autumn leaves. Text was inserted across the picture, defining the Hebrew and Greek words for spirit. At the close of the video, the screen switched to a head shot of Groeschel. He was dressed in a casual shirt and later I saw that he was wearing blue jeans. Groeschel was easy to listen to. An outline version of his sermon showed at the bottom of the screen. Partway through the sermon, we saw another video about water.

I could view a copy of the outline on the screen while I watched, and I could type my own notes into the outline using all Word capabilities. I had options to print notes or email them to myself or anyone else.

At the close of the service, Craig asked people to make decisions related to the message. He asked, “Do you know someone who lives by the power of God?” As he prayed, I could click on a hand in the text box, and the program counted the number of people who had clicked on the icon. Thirteen people responded. “Do you feel drawn to God right now?” Again, Groeschel prayed, and twenty-two people responded. Finally, he asked people to say, “I give my life to you, Jesus.” As he prayed, eleven people responded.
Brandon Donaldson, the Internet pastor, came on the screen after Craig closed the service. He encouraged those who made a decision to follow Jesus to follow up with online representatives by clicking on the prayer link or to follow up with a Christian they know. He offered participants a “What’s Next Kit” containing a Bible and Bible study material which could be accessed online or mailed to their address. Participants were invited to ask questions about anything they had heard, to which they would receive an email response. He also invited participants to join the Facebook space.

I found the service at LifeChurch.tv easier to watch than the service at Flamingo Road Church. The website didn’t freeze periodically, interrupting the service. Sound and image clarity with professional graphics and videos added to understanding. Because there were no technical problems, the technology disappeared. I compared the live versus recorded status of the two services and wondered if this might be another reason LifeChurch.tv was easier to watch. Prerecorded elements allowed editing and insertion of segments intended only for Church Online participants. Later I learned that music segments for the worship experiences are recorded before live audiences twice a year and that each element of the service is pieced together to present a cohesive whole, as if they each naturally followed the other. Some segments of the online worship service are prepared specifically for Church Online, and each service features a greeting and close from the Church Online Campus Pastor. In addition, because each “chat” segment is “live,” it gives the impression that the church service is happening as we watch. The use of prerecorded elements allows LifeChurch.tv to offer services throughout the week at multiple times of the day.

Ultimately, I chose LifeChurch.tv as the focus of my research, in part because of the number of services offered, but also because LifeChurch.tv posts sermon outlines and transcripts, artwork, and many of its video elements online, creating multiple research options. Over time, I noted that the same people logged on to the chat at various times during the week. They knew each other by name and asked about prayer requests and family members even though it was clear from conversations that they had never met. I observed them interact with new people, offering prayer and directing them to click on the prayer request link to speak with someone privately.

As part of my research, I visited Oklahoma City in August 2010 to observe the live services and compare them to the Internet services. On Saturday evening, I attended two
services at the location where Groeschel preaches live and where the sermons are recorded; on Sunday morning, I attended one of the Oklahoma City locations where the sermon is presented by video. Interestingly, Groeschel displays tremendous eye contact online or on video, but that gaze is distracting in person, where he is looking directly into the cameras and not at the live audience. Most of the time, I ended up watching the video even in the live service.

I don’t describe my initial visits to Internet churches as spiritual experiences; my goal was to take notes and observe. The sermons were effective in communicating Scripture and the interpretation of Scripture, and I wondered about the ability of a virtual church to connect participants to God or to provide a sense that they had spent time in God’s presence. I also wondered about the ability of participants to form true community, an important aspect of the Christian church as described in the New Testament. These two objectives are stated goals of the three churches I attended. I wondered, can an Internet church really achieve these goals? Can an Internet church achieve the same things as a church with a physical presence? And can decisions made in a virtual world actually change the way individuals live in the material world? These three churches believe that they can. A more relevant question for this research project concerns the spoken, written, visual, and technological strategies do these churches use to achieve these goals.

First, however, I will review the development of the Internet church movement as well as some of the research surrounding these churches.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Christian church began with twelve disciples, a few hundred followers, and a crucified Messiah, reported to be risen from the dead. By the end of the first century of the Common Era, this movement had spread from the Palestine region to Rome; there were believers in Asia, in Europe, and in Africa. By the end of the fourth century, it had been transformed from what missiologists Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch have described as a “marginalized, subversive, and persecuted movement secretly gathering in houses and catacombs to being the favored religion in the empire.” Indeed, popes had more power than emperors, and the priest had the authority to exclude men and women from the kingdom of heaven. Christendom effectively became the dominant metanarrative of the Western world. It “not only defined church and state, it defined all the individuals and social structures in its orbit of influence” (Frost and Hirsch 8).

Clearly that is no longer the case, and Frost and Hirsch claim that “Christendom has been in decline for the last 250 years, so much so that contemporary Western culture has been called by many historians . . . the post-Christendom culture” (9). Randolph Kluver and Pauline Hope Cheong note that that many social scientists assume that “as the processes of modernization . . . spread around the world, religious faith [will] be replaced with an atheistic set of beliefs or, at the very least, that religion [will] become socially and culturally irrelevant” (1123). In Technopoly, Neil Postman describes this process and claims that as Americans find a “technological alternative” for Old World beliefs, habits, and traditions (54), including religion, the success of these alternatives inevitably leads to the “devaluation of traditional beliefs” (55). In other words, new ways of viewing the world will lead to disdain for the old ways.

A statistical decline in church attendance and adherence to a specific faith system in the Western world suggests that the secularization theory may have merit. A 44-nation Pew Global Attitudes study dated 2002 “correlated views on religion with annual per capita income and found that wealthier nations tend to place less importance on religion . . . ”
Among Wealthy nations have the most access to technology, and this again appears to confirm the secularization theory. The Pew study observed that secularization was particularly prevalent in Europe. Even in strongly Roman Catholic Italy, fewer than three-in-ten people claimed that religion played an important role in their lives. Christopher Helland wrote that the most recent Canadian census revealed a continuing decline in church attendance at mainline Protestant churches, which has fallen from better than 50 percent in the 1950s to 20 percent at the beginning of the twenty-first century. He stated that although this statistic appears to suggest the abandonment of spiritual or religious beliefs, in fact most Canadians are still interested in the “ultimate questions of meaning that religions seek to answer” (33). Similarly, a 2008 Religious Landscape Survey by the PEW Forum asking about the importance of religion in the lives of Americans revealed 24 percent claimed to attend church on a weekly basis. Examination of actual church attendance statistics suggests that this number may be even smaller; a 2005 study by C. Kirk Hadaway and P. L. Marler, published in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, demonstrates that the actual statistic of Americans who play an active role in a church is 23 percent (308).

These statistics raise questions as to the future of religion, and in particular, the future of the evangelical Christian church, whose purpose is to be witnesses for Christ in the world. Craig Van Gelder, professor of congregational mission at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, argues that in the midst of such shifts in attitude toward matters of faith, it is “important . . . to keep returning to the foundations of what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ in the world” (1). Indeed, he claims that the “the primary issue confronting the church in our context today . . . is the need to re-examine and re-envision what it means to be the church” (vii).

Many evangelical Christian churches are engaging technology and new media in order to do just that. In The Internet Church, by Walter Wilson, he suggests that “Christians not view the Internet as a technology, but as God’s moving to bring the gospel to every man, woman, and child upon the earth” (15). Similarly, Helland observed that a 1996 study by Barna Research recommended that church organizations quickly establish online presence to avoid losing touch with their parishioners and risk losing the ability to advise them in an era of rapid technological growth (26). This type of thinking has resulted in a proliferation of religious websites. Christopher Helland observes that the Open Directory Project, which evaluates and classifies all forms of sites on the Internet, documented Web sites containing
“thousands of different belief systems and denominations in fifty-seven different languages” (27). Drawing on this data from Yahoo and Lycos, as well as a number of other search engines, Helland concluded that “popular religion was flourishing online” (26).

Thus, although the secularization theory may have merit, it appears that the same forces that cause tech-savvy populations to distance themselves from traditional religion also motivate evangelical Christians to engage the technology for evangelistic purposes. Stefan Gelfgren observes that churches “see the potential in using Internet for reaching out to people and for building new relations, especially when it is said we are living in an age of secularization—including a declining role for institutionalized Christianity” (3); and Stephen O’Leary observes that as people are spending more and more of their time online, it “would indeed be an anomaly if a cultural force of this magnitude were not to find expression in the newly developing world of computer networks” (782). In “Finding God on the Web,” published in *Time*, 1996, Joshua Cooper Ramo reported, “Like schools, like businesses, like governments, like nearly everyone, it seems, religious groups are rushing online, setting up church home pages, broadcasting dogma and establishing theological newsgroups, bulletin boards and chat rooms.”

Religious groups are also setting up Internet churches, online spiritual communities dedicated to communicating the Gospel and providing spiritual fellowship. To some, “talk of a ‘cyberchurch’ sounds like misguided science fiction,” but Campbell observes that the phenomenon is not new and many church leaders see the internet “as a space for church planting [that] has . . . given rise to a movement of cyber-evangelists seeking to spread the Christian message online.” She notes that no matter how “questionable online Christianity may seem to some . . . these manifestations create new options for people of faith and may change people’s expectations and conceptions of Christianity and Christian religious community” (*Exploring* 63).

Both Gelfgren and Campbell provide detailed histories of the development of internet churches and point to religious-oriented online groups on Usenet as the origin of the cyberchurch movement. Douglas Estes notes that the first virtual church formed in 1985, “even before the advent of the web,” and that an “unnamed pioneering group of believers worshiped together through text-only interface” (25). In 1992, ordained Presbyterian minister Charles Henderson founded the First Church of Cyberspace, an association of
ecumenical churches and individuals (Campbell, *Exploring* 64) meeting every Sunday evening for conversations using IRC (Internet Relay Chat). In a 1996 article published in *Crosscurrents*, Henderson predicted, “Computer-mediated communications technology will have profound effects upon the way in which people practice faith, as well as communicate with each other and with God.” Estes estimates that by the year 2000, there were approximately thirty virtual churches, created by technically literate individuals who had very little institutional church support (25). He reflects that this changed in 2004, when the Methodist Church in the United Kingdom created an experimental 3D church known as Church of Fools. As previously discussed in the first chapter, this church functioned for only four months due to financial issues, but on its peak day, over forty-one thousand people logged on for worship services.

Campbell observes that “Christians, like other traditional religious groups, are readily appropriating internet technology as outreach tools and as part of church life, with impressive results” (*Exploring* 62). In his October 2009 article, “Church Virtually,” published in *Leadership Journal*, Chad Hall reports that the trend started in 2007 with a handful of churches and has grown to dozens of congregations, including those studied in this thesis. He predicts that “the momentum will likely lead to the launch of hundreds of virtual churches in the years ahead” (47). Jim Tomberlin, the founder and strategist of Multisite Solutions, a consulting organization that helps churches expand their reach by establishing additional campuses, shares his enthusiasm and predicts, “We will see an explosion of Internet campuses in the next decade.” Consultants are available to help churches establish Internet church presence, and Brian Vasil, the Internet Campus Pastor for Potential Church, acts as a consultant for Tomberlin’s organization. Dana Byers, a volunteer for LifeChurch.tv’s Church Online, established her own consulting organization, BlueDoor.tv, to help churches establish online presence, and published *The Art of Online Ministry: Keys to Launching an Online Church*.

In the mid-1990s, religion online captured the attention of researchers and religious practitioners, “yielding diverse reactions and methodologies” in an attempt to describe and understand this “new realm in which to experience the spiritual dimensions of life” (Campbell, *Exploring* 56). Dawson and Cowan note that initial studies of religion in cyberspace veered to both “utopian and dystopian extremes” and that even before serious
study could be made, “commentators began to sing the praise of the transformative and
liberating potentials of the new medium.” The birth of the Internet signaled a “new frontier,”
where people from “diverse backgrounds could meet in ways that transcended the physical
and social imitations of their daily lives,” where people could meet vastly diverse
individuals, from different countries, cultures, and experiences. The Internet, therefore,
constituted the “giant step forward into the ‘global village’ that Marshall McLuhan had
predicted in the 1960s” (8). Dana R. Fisher and Larry Michael Wright observe that “utopians
posit the cyberspace will make it easier for people to communicate both politically and
otherwise.” Campbell reflects that the Internet has been proclaimed as the second
“electronic” Reformation and has been compared to the printing press as “a revolutionary
tool for spreading the message of Christianity” (Exploring 61).

Similarly, some Christian leaders hailed the new technology. In his book *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*, Douglas Estes, professor of New Testament at Western Seminary in San Jose, observes that a “change is occurring in the Christian church
the likes of which has not happened for centuries. At the beginning of the twenty-first
century, the church is beginning to be different not in style, venue, feel, or volume, but in the
world in which it exists” (17). He expounds upon its wonders, declaring, “This type of
church is unlike any church the world has ever seen. It has the power to break down social
barriers, unite believers from all over the world, and build the kingdom of God with a
widow’s mite of financing. It is a completely different type of church from any the world has
ever seen” (Estes 18)

Even more spectacularly, Walter P. Wilson claims that the advent of the Internet
signals a pivotal shift in world history:

There are watershed events that shape human history: The Fall, the Flood, the
crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Pentecost. After those events,
nothing was the same. Other events of a lesser nature have affected the course of
history, moments in time—some of them introduced by man, but all of them
orchestrated by God. Today we live during one of those life-altering events that
is being orchestrated by God. This is the Internet moment in human history.
From now on, nothing will be the same. (xi)

Wilson argues that the Internet provides “the opportunity to reach every man, woman, and
child on the face of the earth in the next decade” and that Christians must exercise
responsibility and “the words of Jesus, who said, ‘Go and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’ (Matthew 28:19 NIV)” (xiv).

The adoption of any technology, however, raises questions about the effect of that technology on the people who use it, and Fisher and Wright describe “the dystopian position [which] emphasizes the potential of the medium to affect communication in such a way that it may negatively alter the practices and spaces of communication that had previously nurtured democracy,” leading to the “loss of strong bonds among members of a society.” Heidi Campbell writes that fears have “emerged that online religion [will] cause people to abandon their pews in exchange for worship via the keyboard and computer screen, further affecting the decline of ‘real world’ church attendance” (Exploring xvi). Brenda Brasher suggests that the “chief worry is that engagement with the Internet could reconfigure the traditions that technologically adept, spiritually committed people have gone online to maintain” (xii). Hipps finds it “troubling” that “so many communities of faith are in hot pursuit of . . . technologies,” noting that “the Internet is emphatically not a neutral aid” (Flickering 115). He claims that although “relative intimacy can be gained in virtual settings, the experiences of permanence and proximity have all but vanished” (Flickering 114). Estes recalls that a virtual church pastor told him off the record that the reason other pastors “were opposed to virtual churches [was] that ‘they’ were afraid virtual churches would steal ‘their’ people” (39).

Fisher and Wright caution against these extreme viewpoints, writing, “Beyond these dominant themes of utopian and dystopian visions of the Internet, it should be noted that a third theme, which can be described as technorealism, is also represented in the literature.” This more cautious view of the Internet claims that the technology is too new for scholars to have determined the effects and that the truth regarding the Internet “lies somewhere in between these utopian and dystopian interpretations.” They suggest that that the extreme readings of the effects of the Internet are the result of a cultural lag and urge additional research.

With regard to religion online, Dawson and Cowan write, “The Internet is has suffered from an excessively effusive press—it has been hyped and demonized in the popular media to a point where fewer and fewer people may care to pay attention.” However, they
note that researchers have begun to discover “the truth behind the hyperbole.” In fact, they observe:

Cyberspace is not quite as unusual a place as sometimes predicted. Life in cyberspace is in continuity with so-called “real life,” and this holds true for religion as well. People are doing online pretty much what they do offline, but they are doing it differently.” (1)

In essence, they note “the Internet is both a mirror and a shadow of the offline world. That is, there is very little in the real world that is not reproduced online, and very little online that has no offline foundation or referent” (6). For that reason, they conclude, it is important to examine how this new way of being religious will influence the ways religion is understood and practiced in the future (1).

Hutchings confirms these observations, noting that researchers in this field have observed one consistent feature—“online churches . . . closely replicate offline forms” (63). For example, Potential Church, LifeChurch’s Church Online, and St. Pixels all lead visitors in worship through music, prayer, and teaching. All of these elements would also be present in an offline evangelical church. Brick and mortar churches take up an offering every week; Potential Church and Church Online provide opportunities for giving during services as well as throughout the week; St. Pixels provides a link to facilitate donations on its website. In this way, participants can support the ministry of these online organizations. LifeChurch.tv’s Church Online participants “take time to celebrate Communion as a community” four times a year. Participants are encouraged to prepare their own elements, using bread and juice or wine and to invite their “friends and family to attend the Online Experience and take communion together” (Steward). Moreover, in all three churches in this study, participants form relationships with each other and serve in volunteer capacities through the Internet church.

Lorne Dawson and Jenna Hennebry observe cast doubt on the ability of Internet churches to effectively persuade someone to embrace a new religion, observing, “The most reliable results of decades of research into religious conversions, cast doubt on the special utility of the World Wide Web as a mechanism of recruitment” (153). In his 1997 book The Soul of Cyberspace, How New Technology is Changing Our Spiritual Lives, Jeffrey P. Zaleski underscores this observation, stating, “Internet ministries are never meant to be a replacement for the real church. It is impossible for anyone to develop a personal
relationship with God without being around His people, His church” (125). Nevertheless, Dawson and Cowan observe that the Internet is commonly used for evangelism or proselytizing. LifeChurch.tv regularly reads letters from Church Online participants who write that they became Christians because of the ministry of Church Online. They also post testimonials on their Facebook page.7

Gelfgren acknowledges concerns that the Internet will lead to isolation, but observes that one “highly interesting feature of virtual churches is the return to collective expressions of faith” (26). In other words, Internet churches help participants establish online spiritual community so they do not worship alone, but with others who agree with them. And, although secularization theory “often stresses individualization and/or privatization of religious commitment,” the development of virtual churches allows individuals to express their faith in community so that believing “is not something you do only hidden in your private sphere, on your own” (26). Rather than attributing changes in modes of Christian communication and Christian practices to dystopian views of the Internet, Gelfgren contends that the Church is changing because the world is changing and the Church is changing with it. He suggests it is important to “relate churches in virtual worlds to an overall changing role of Christianity” and claims that “virtual churches are a part of the general process of religious transformation” (1). Steve Woolgar suggests that virtual technologies will not take the place of real activities, but will supplement them, creating “interesting new forms of interrelationship between the virtual and the real, and the modification of both modes of communication” (16-17). Internet churches allow religious activities to be mediated electronically, and “this mediation allows things to be done in ways that are somewhat new and sometimes entirely innovative” (Dawson and Cowan 1).

This purpose of this thesis is to examine the modifications and study the new and innovative ways Christians worship on the Internet, the words and images they use that create new realities about God and community. In order to create these realities, these churches must first demonstrate that they are credible sources of information. They must inspire trust, an important element of credibility. In the field of rhetoric, scholarly

7 http://www.facebook.com/lifechurchtv?sk=notes
discussions on credibility begin with Aristotle and his observations surrounding ethos, or persuasion by character. Because trust is such an essential element in building credibility, it is important to ask: How do Internet churches instill trust in their audience? How do they establish credibility?
CHAPTER 3

PERSUASION THROUGH CHARACTER:
ESTABLISHING TRUST WITH DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY

Evangelical Christian churches claim to speak for God. Following Jesus’ mandate to go into the world and make disciples, they communicate God’s truth about life and love and salvation. They must construct a reality in which there is a God who speaks through the Bible, desires a relationship with humanity, and has certain expectations of his followers. Moreover, these churches must establish that they can be trusted to communicate these truths. In traditional brick-and-mortar churches, churches construct this reality and establish trust through the words of the pastor, certainly, but also through employees and volunteers, church architecture and design, cleanliness, or lack of it, and the friendliness of other parishioners, among many, many other details. In the same way, every aspect of an Internet church plays a role in building trust on the part of the audience. This includes the words spoken by the pastor and staff, during the sermon as well as at other times during the Internet services, written information provided on the website, the dialogue on chat functions, website design, and the technical expertise displayed by the church.

Online communication presents unique challenges for Internet churches in establishing trust because website designers must consider old ways of establishing trust and incorporate new ones as well. Ananda Mitra and Elisia Cohen affirm this, noting “[s]uch challenges offer the opportunity to reexamine the methods that have worked well with traditional texts and consider how the methods themselves can be modified to address an emerging textual form” (199). Reflecting on the potential difficulties of computer-mediated communication and need for adaptation, psychologist Kenneth Gergen claims, “The technology of the age expands the variety of human relationships and modifies the forms of older ones. When relationships move from the face-to-face to the electronic mode, they are often altered” (65). Not only can the visitors to the church not actually see the church, they
cannot look into the eyes of the speaker or see the response of other parishioners. As a result, Gergen explains that there is a tendency for users of electronic technology to “create an imaginary other with whom to relate” (65). Based on elements they see and hear on the website, visitors to the Internet church must construct an identity of the pastor and of the church; in order to effectively communicate new realities, churches must create websites that allow visitors to construct an identity that engenders trust. S. Shyam Sundar, founding director of The Media Effects Research Laboratory at Penn State University, observes that trust “is a key component of credibility” (81). Internet churches must carefully construct a new reality, a character that inspires trust. If they fail to do so, they will also fail in their goal to expand the message contained in the Gospels.

The development of this type of online communication is relatively recent. Stefano Pace observes that although the Internet was previously a cold medium, dealing primarily with text and dissemination of information, it has evolved into a hot medium, “in the sense that emotions and feelings can be experienced and communicated online.” As such, he notes that it has become an ideal site for religious communication. He acknowledges specific difficulties for this application, noting that “religious communication deals with abstract concepts, involves profound sentiments and can have specific and difficult goals such as converting people.” He claims, “The central feature of online religious communications is trust” and asks, “How do religious leaders communicate trustworthiness?”

As mentioned previously, every aspect of an Internet church website, not just the worship service, must communicate values that instill trust in an unseen audience. For that reason, a discussion of trust building in Internet churches presents a complex task. Numerous studies demonstrate that design and technological aspects play a primary role in establishing trust in an audience. This emphasis on surface characteristics and presentation rather than on reputation or credentials draws a comparison with Aristotle and his discussion of ethos and the ability of a speaker to inspire trust because of speech demonstrating trustworthy characteristics. This chapter focuses on ways Internet churches construct a trustworthy identity through the use of design and technology. This focus allows me to begin with traditional methods of establishing trust, as presented by Aristotle, and then modify these methods to incorporate the findings of more recent scholarship. I will begin by providing a brief review of Aristotle’s ethos. I will then examine web credibility studies
demonstrating that surface and design characteristics play a primary role in determining the trustworthiness of a site. In addition, in order to demonstrate how stylistic and technological choices can influence the audience perception of identity and trustworthiness, I will compare the stylistic and technological choices of LifeChurch.tv’s Church Online and Potential Church. I argue that these surface design and technological characteristics construct an identity that demonstrates virtue, goodwill, and wisdom, the three qualities of trustworthiness described by Aristotle.

Aristotle and Persuasion through Character

In his translation of On Rhetoric, George Kennedy writes, “Aristotle sought to discover what was universally true, and to a considerable extent he was successful” (21). He notes that Aristotle’s “system of rhetoric can, and has been, used to describe the phenomenon of speech in cultures as diverse from the Greeks as the ancient Hebrews, the Chinese, and primitive societies around the world; and it can be used to describe many features of modern communication (21). This includes the ability of a speaker to demonstrate credibility by establishing that he or she is trustworthy. Andrew Flanagin and Miriam Metzger observe, “Scholarly interest in credibility dates back to Aristotle’s writings on rhetoric and his notions of ethos” (7). Pace defines trustworthiness as an expectation that a religious leader will behave in a way that is beneficial to the audience. This type of trustworthiness is an important element of Aristotle’s notion of ethos, or “persuasion through character” (38), introduced in Book I of On Rhetoric. For that reason, Aristotle’s definitions of ethos provide a useful starting point when asking how Internet churches establish credibility.

Aristotle observes that speakers must demonstrate in their speeches that they are “worthy of credence” because “we believe fair-minded to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others]” (38). He elaborates on ethos in Book II and identifies several qualities that develop trust in an audience, even more than “logical demonstrations” (112). These include practical wisdom or prudence, virtue or excellence, and goodwill and friendliness (112-113). William J. Fortenbaugh summarizes Aristotle’s passages on ethos, stating that an “audience believes a speaker who is respected and trusted” (209). Warnick emphasizes the importance of this perception, stating, “To be viewed as credible, the author must be perceived as a person of goodwill who has the audience’s best interest at heart and also as an
expert in some sense—one who is qualified to speak on the topic at hand” (“Online” 258). Self-characterization that incorporates each of these attributes demonstrates that the speaker can be trusted because the audience perceives that he or she will speak truthfully and his or her words will benefit them in some way. Fortenbaugh notes that this self-characterization demonstrating trustworthiness “can be employed throughout the speech” (228). Everything the speaker says, from the beginning of the speech to the end, constructs an identity that demonstrates virtue or goodness, concern for the audience, and wisdom and expertise that can help the audience.

It is important to note here that Aristotle identifies the speech itself as having the power to engender trust and “not . . . a previous opinion that the speaker is a certain kind of person” (Kennedy 39). Ruth Amossy elaborates on this aspect of ethos, stating, “In Aristotle’s art of persuasion, the term ethos in Greek, character) designates the image of self built in by the oratory in his speech in order to exert an influence on his audience” (1). In essence, speakers must construct a new reality, an image of self that displays all of these character traits. Warnick observes that in Aristotle’s time, juries made decisions about guilt or innocence solely on the “perceived character of the speakers themselves and the likelihood that as individuals, they would behave in certain ways and take certain actions” (“Online” 256). She notes that factual evidence was rarely presented, and juries were unlikely to include this information in making decisions. Audience perceptions of character were constructed primarily by what speakers said and how they said it. She contends that what was important was “the portrayal of one’s moral character and the extent to which it [aligned] with the conventional values and beliefs of . . . the speaker’s audience” (“Online” 256). Warnick asserts that this scenario is analogous to perceptions of credibility and trustworthiness on the World Wide Web and that Internet users frequently form credibility judgments based on design aspects rather than an author or organization’s reputed credibility. She observes this emphasis on self-characterization rather than reputation challenges modern judgments about the nature of credibility, which primarily depend on “attributes of the message source, especially expertise, reputation, believability, and trustworthiness” (Rhetoric Online: Persuasion and Politics 46). Web credibility studies demonstrate that users make determinations of credibility based on a continual series of judgments about design and
presentation as well as message, but do not initially consider the credentials or reputation of the source.

**Adapting Aristotle’s Model to Fit Online Rhetoric**

Because of its emphasis on perceptions of trustworthiness rather than reputation or credentials, and because of the importance of presentation in establishing credibility, Aristotelian *ethos* offers an excellent model with which to examine constructions of credibility in Internet churches. However, online environments present also multiple challenges to Aristotle’s construction of *ethos*. First, Aristotle envisions a single speaker addressing an audience with both present in the same space. In this way, a speaker determines the best means of self-characterization by assessing that needs and desires of that audience. It should be noted that Aristotelian rhetoric has been adapted to include written rhetoric, demonstrating the adaptability of the concept. With written rhetoric, authors cannot see their audiences. Therefore, they must construct an imaginary audience in order to know how to direct their appeals. Additionally, the audience cannot see the author and must construct an imaginary author based on cues provided by the author. Internet churches employ both written and spoken rhetoric in addition to multiple surface and technical design elements, and all of these must be constructed to appeal to an imaginary audience.

Sundar observes that “in an Internet-based media, source is a murky entity because there are often multiple layers of sources in online transmission of information” (73). In Internet churches, the pastor giving the sermon is not the only source of communication, nor is he or she the only source that needs to be deemed trustworthy. Unseen writers, artists, and web designers create text, images, and technological affordances that are then displayed on the church site. Church participants interpret and comment on these words and images, sharing their viewpoints and further influencing constructions of identity. Thus, an Internet church has multiple sources, and each element of a Internet church website works together to construct a trustworthy identity. These elements merge together to characterize the trustworthiness of the Internet church rather than that of a single individual. In her analysis of religious web pages, Anastasia Karaflogka affirms that, “The official pages project how its leaders perceive a religion or a religious institution and how they transmit this perception”
In essence, the web page functions as a vehicle for self-characterization of the organization or institution. In the same way, Internet churches use their websites to construct an identity that represents the way the church organizations views itself, which it then presents to an indeterminate audience. Karaflogka notes that every website communicates a unique message using images, which “like verbal languages, are constructed in different ways” (282). Not only do web pages communicate information about religious organizations, but they also become “the signatures of particular agents who use powerful pictorial symbols in order to achieve maximum strengthening of their transmitted message” (282).

In “The Virtual Vatican: A Case Study Regarding Online Ethos,” Todd S. Frobish, examines linguistic and non-linguistic appeals of the Vatican’s website, which are designed to inspire trust in its users. He observes, “Religions moving online must learn to shape their identity by appealing to what might be called a traditional view of religious character while simultaneously filtering those appeals through the new environment” (39). He asks about the core components of an online religious-based ethos and contends, “Religions moving online must learn how to shape their identities while simultaneously filtering those appeals through the new environment” (39). Referencing Aristotle as well as George Campbell, the eighteenth century author of Philosophy of Rhetoric who was also a Presbyterian minister, Frobish lists four qualities that religious organizations must establish when constructing a trustworthy online identity. The first of these is a community-oriented identity, in which religious groups identify with their followers, show compassion for them, speak directly to them, and tailor messages to them in order to build a “the speaker-audience connection necessary for persuasion.” Frobish observes that this concern for audience should be displayed everywhere on the website. Additionally, he observes “this would also mean that [a religious organization] should adapt [its] web technology to fit the audience’s needs and wishes” (40). The next quality religious organizations must display is moral character and virtue; their language and actions must illustrate traits such as moderation, candor, benevolence or goodwill toward the audience, and honesty. In addition, Frobish suggests that groups “who can show deference something higher than themselves may appear more trustworthy than others” (41). The third quality is an appearance intelligence and knowledgeability. Not only must a religious organization demonstrate “expert understanding
of the religion,” but it must also demonstrate that the intelligence or knowledge “has helped individuals or the larger community” (42).

Frobish’s first three qualities relate closely the values described by Aristotle in his discussion of *ethos*. However, he adds a fourth value, that of verbal and design competence. Frobish describes verbal competence as eloquence and compares design competence to “a speaker’s clothes and his or her mannerisms” (41), claiming that these may have the power to reveal more about the speaker’s identity that the words themselves. This fourth value links closely with Aristotle’s notion of *to prepon*, translated by Kennedy as appropriateness or propriety. Aristotle defines this as a manner of speaking which “expresses emotion and character and is proportional to the subject matter” (210). In other words, the choice of words and the style and mannerisms of the speaker fit the occasion and the subject matter. Aristotle asserts that *to prepon* has the power to “create a sense of character” (211). Cicero refers to this same value as decorum, which Glen McClish describes as a “sense of seemliness, propriety, appropriate conduct, decency, or good breeding that enhances one’s character” (7). In essence, when manner and style of speaking align with what an audience expects in a given situation, they construct an image of the character of the speaker, inspiring audience trust and therefore credibility. Nancy Christiansen expands on the connection between *ethos* and decorum and asserts that “in addition to contributing to the message, voice and gesture point to the speakers thoughts and passions—in essence, character” (306).

In the context of Internet churches, verbal design and competence replace voice and gesture on websites, playing a powerful role in constructing character that inspires trustworthiness and creates credibility. To demonstrate verbal design competence, Frobish suggests that churches should incorporate welcoming language, demonstrate accessibility, and use biblical imagery and metaphors to demonstrate connection to faith, all of which demonstrate appropriateness to the occasion and subject matter. Additionally, Frobish warns against “spelling or grammar errors, which would quickly damage its credibility” (41). He suggests that visitors to a religious website “might anticipate simple colors and images, and not bright colors or animated graphics” (44). Additionally Frobish notes design competence includes site maintenance, making sure all links are working, and navigation is facilitated by a site map. He claims, “These technical appeals are a necessity for the organization that wishes to create an image of competence” (44).
THE ROLE OF VERBAL AND DESIGN COMPETENCE IN ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY

Warnick’s research affirms this inclusion of verbal and design competence, noting rhetorical criticism of a website “may consider implicit as well as explicit features of messages” including the ways “textual design is enacted through word, action, image, and sound” (“New Media” 61). Just as Aristotle’s speaker displays attributes of good character and trustworthiness throughout his or speech, so Internet churches must exhibit these attributes at all times when users visit the websites. C. Nadine Wathen and Jacquelyn Burkell, professors of information and media studies at the University of Western Ontario, assert that “aspects of presentation are . . . relevant to credibility assessment” (140). They add, “For Internet information, even a single spelling mistake can give the impression of ‘amateurism’ and lead the user to reject the site as not credible” (139). That image of competence is the first factor website visitors consider when determining if a site is trustworthy or credible, and Sundar claims, “Users are known to not only reject or ignore Web sites that have poor design appeal, but also to mistrust them.” (76)

A 2002 study by B.J. Fogg, Cathy Soohoo, and David Danielson titled In “How Do People Evaluate a Web Site’s Credibility” demonstrates this tendency. The study asked 2,684 subjects to evaluate the credibility of Web sites by comparing two live Web sites on similar topics. They found that the “design look” of the site was the most important element in establishing credibility, mentioned in 46.1 percent of the comments. The next most important elements were information structure and information focus (4). Fogg concludes that “the visual design may be the first test of a site’s credibility. If it fails on this criterion, Web users are likely to abandon the site and seek other sources of information and services” (26). Miriam Metzger, professor of communication at University of California, Santa Barbara, summarizes Fogg’s study as well as the results from smaller studies from (Rieh, 2002; Eysenbach and Kohler, 2002; and Scholz-Crane, 1998) and concludes that “design/presentational elements appear to be the primary factor in users’ credibility and information-quality assessments” (2083).

Wathen and Burkell illustrate this pattern and describe three stages leading to website credibility once a user enters a website (141). The first stage concerns evaluation of surface credibility based on examination of surface characteristics. In this stage, website users look
at appearance or presentation, usability and design, and organization of information, asking, “Does this site look professional?” and “Can I get what I want quickly and easily?” As part of this stage, they note users consider colors, graphics, fonts, web page clutter, navigability, interactivity, download speed, and ease of access. If the site fails on any of these counts, the user leaves the site. The message may indeed be credible, but the user likely will leave before investigating the information contained in the site and will never consider message credibility or content evaluation, the second and third stages in Wathen and Burkell’s algorithm.

It is important to note that the questions described by Wathen and Burkell correlate to the qualities described by Aristotle and by Frobish. In his discussion on appropriateness, Aristotle observes “[o]pportune or inopportune usage is a factor common to all species of [rhetoric]” and warns that a “speaker should preempt criticism” (211) because to do otherwise will construct a sense of character that does not inspire trust. Website visitors expect professional, easy to navigate websites. As a result, a professional website appears wise or knowledgeable, and a sloppy website with clutter, misspelled words, or broken links reflects poorly on the expertise or wisdom of the individual or organization represented by the website. A poorly constructed website may demonstrate laziness, failure to take care of details, or lack of concern for the audience, constructing an image of the individual or organization that does not inspire trustworthiness. Wathen and Burkell confirm this observation, indicating that “surface characteristics, such as errors unrelated to content, negatively influence credibility” (107). For Internet churches claiming to hold out words of truth and salvation to the world, appealing surface characteristics construct an ethos that promotes trustworthiness and encourages website users to participate in church services. Karaflogka approaches religious websites by asking key questions related to the overall design of a page and the role of colors (282). Thus, the self-characterization of trustworthiness begins on the home page of Internet churches. Consciously or unconsciously, site visitors make judgments about the trustworthiness of these churches based on multiple factors. Does the church address site visitors personally? Does it address their concerns? These factors might display goodwill for the audience. Is the font easy to read? Are links easy to find? Can the site visitor access relevant information without a lot of effort? These factors might indicate benevolence. Do images demonstrate virtue, goodwill,
and wisdom, or do they imply self-interest? What do the colors communicate? These design choices help construct realities about the trustworthiness of LifeChurch.tv’s Church Online as well as Potential Church.

LifeChurch.tv’s home page (see Figure 8) features a soft red background and a welcome message with large white Arial font across the center. The message reads, “Welcome Home. Whether you’re hungry or hurt, lonely or lost, full of questions or looking for a home, there’s a place for you at LifeChurch.tv.” Below the message, three black-and-white photos framed with a darker hue of red depict specific aspects of LifeChurch.tv’s character. Clicking on each photo takes the site visitor to a new page. At the top, visitors see a black banner with a small LifeChurch.tv logo on the left, and in the top right-hand corner of the page, they see a countdown clock that signals when the next online experience starts. If a service has already started, the clock is replaced with an invitation in capital letters: “LIVE – JOIN NOW!” Below the countdown clock, hyperlinks offer information about the church. These hyperlinks correspond with the information communicated in the photos.

![Figure 8. LifeChurch.tv home page. Image adapted from www.lifechurch.tv.](image-url)
The text speaks directly to site visitors, which Frobish suggests illustrates community identity. The simple, symmetrical design invites visitors to slow down and explore the church. The links guide me two different ways. In Frobish’s discussion of design eloquence, he advocates gentle language, demonstrating accessibility, rather than “aggressive persuasive appeals” (43). The imagery and design suggests benevolence and concern for the audience, allowing me to proceed at my own pace.

Potential Church’s website, in contrast, features a fast-moving slide show against a gray background. Each slide promotes a different aspect of church life, the weekend worship service, youth camp, the summer sermon series, a beach baptism concert, and job openings (see Figure 9). All of these activities take place near the physical campuses, prohibiting Internet church visitors from participation. Each slide functions as a link to a page with additional information, but the slides change every three seconds, potentially making it difficult to read the slides or click on the link. The slides incorporate complicated graphics and bright colors such as neon blue and pink, fuchsia, true red, electric blue. To the right of the slide show, site visitors see a photo of Troy Gramling. Clicking on the link takes site visitors to TroyGramling.com. Below the Troy Gramling link, an “Outreach Partners” link takes site visitors to a list of nine ministries supported by Potential Church. Seven of these ministries operate in Florida near Potential Church’s three Florida campuses. Two operate in Peru, near their campus in Peru. Again, Internet church visitors are excluded from participation. Unlike LifeChurch.tv, Potential Church’s home site includes no welcome message. The fast-paced slide show could frustrate site visitors interested in more information, signaling lack of concern for site visitors. Failure to include Internet church specific activities, excluding them from community participation, demonstrates lack of accessibility. Additionally, color psychology with marketing applications indicate that high-energy colors may reduce credibility for certain products. Frobish suggests that although “flashy or bright colors would grab a user’s attention, they could also turn that user’s attention away from the content of the site to the delivery of the material instead” (44).

As indicated by this research, colors play an important role in self-characterization on a website. Scholars in the field of color psychology examine the effect of color choices in brand marketing. Thomas Madden, Kelly Hewett, and Martin S. Roth conducted a series of cross-national studies based on the assumption that “color influences both human behavior
and human physiology” (94), and in assumption that “color influences both human behavior and human physiology” (94), and in an article published in *Management Science*, Gerald Gorn et al. observes, “It is widely accepted that people’s feelings are affected by color” (1389). Paul Bottomley and John Doyle differentiate between sensory-social colors, such as red, which signal interpersonal relationships, and colors that emphasize function, such as blue and gray. LifeChurch.tv’s choice of a muted red background constructs a warm, accessible identity. Gorn et al. examined the effects of hue on advertising and found that certain hues “influence feelings of excitement and relaxation” and that “feelings of relaxation appear to have a favorable impact on attitude” (1397). The choice of a soft red, toned down by the black and white photos, evokes feelings of relaxation that allow site visitors to approach the web site at their own pace. Again, visitors to LifeChurch.tv’s website may perceive the church to be benevolent and concerned for their welfare. The continually moving bright colors of Potential Church may produce feelings of excitement, and these may negatively influence credibility. Madden, Hewett, and Roth note studies have shown “blue is associated with wealth, trust, and security; gray is associated with strength, exclusivity, and
success” (91), and as mentioned, colors like blue and gray emphasize function. The actual Church Online page for LifeChurch.tv, has a blue background signaling a different focus than the information pages on the rest of the website. Similarly, the background for Potential Church’s Internet church page is gray. Both of these colors enhance credibility and trustworthiness.

Lyn Dally Geboy, an account executive for BVK/McDonald, asserts that although color plays an important role in persuasive marketing, “[c]olor alone can't conceal an incomplete or ill-conceived strategy, nor can it make up for a bad design. However, when color is used as part of a well thought-out strategy . . . its presence can make for a more effective marketing effort” (54).

**TECHNOLOGICAL AFFORDANCES AND THE PERCEPTION OF TRUSTWORTHINESS**

The inclusion of certain technical features also has the power to signal judgments related to the qualities of trustworthiness described by Aristotle. Sundar argues that technological features have the power to “transmit their own cues that are influential in shaping users’ perceptions and processing of content” (78). He contends these features function as a form of discourse that evokes psychological responses, acting as a source of persuasion. This type of persuasion works as part of the medium itself, and R. David Lankes, professor of Information Studies at Syracuse University, asserts “that people are simply unable to, or fail to, recognize many of the more technical influences on the information with which they are provided in the first place” (104). He claims, “there is a great deal of information manipulation that occurs that is never perceptible to the user. Built into the tools themselves are filters, assumptions, biases, and outright distortions that can never be factored into a user’s credibility decision” (104). Lankes notes studies show that the media used to access the information, combined with the online environment itself, work together to influence credibility. He observes that “this work highlights how credibility can be determined and manipulated by technical elements, such as load time of Web pages or site design” (104). Essentially, the technology itself becomes part of the religious discourse, working to construct an appealing identity that communicates the virtue, benevolence, and wisdom of the Internet churches.
Sundar explains the process by which these technological features shape users' perceptions and identifies four technological affordances or capabilities that trigger heuristics or judgment rules “that can result in estimations of content quality.” Sundar acknowledges multiple definitions for the term *quality*, but asserts that it “encompasses such considerations as utility, importance, relevance, completeness, level of detail, clarity, variety, accessibility, trustworthiness, uniqueness, timeliness, and objectivity” (80). It is important to note that many of these characteristics of content quality evoke judgments reflecting Aristotle’s qualities constructing trust in an audience or Frobish’s interpretations of these qualities. Certain affordances may cause an audience to identity a source as being friendly, wise, practical, honest, knowledgeable, sympathetic, or concerned for audience wellbeing.

In “The Perceived Moral Qualities of Web Sites: Implications for Persuasion Processes in Human-Computer Interaction,” Robert Magee and Sriram Kalyanaraman ask, “Can people attribute traits of morality to Web sites? (113). They acknowledge that “[t]o be moral, an agent must demonstrate intentionality, but cite research demonstrating “people attribute social characteristics to computers, even when they explicitly deny having done so” (113). They suggest that “human values must be taken into account when technology is designed. Technology must be designed in a way that supports fundamental human values and is sensitive to cultural variations (112) because “perceptions of integrity and morality influence a Web site’s perceived credibility.” These observations are important for Internet churches as integrity and morality are expected traits of Christian churches. Moreover, “[a] site that can engender trust in the information it provides is more likely to cultivate enduring relationship with visitors (113).

Sundar’s research isolates “four broad affordances that have shown significant psychological effects” (78). These are modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability. He observes that these affordances are found to a greater or lesser degree in most digital media and “seem promising in their ability to cue cognitive heuristics pertaining to credibility” because they create “structural features that underlie the design aspects or surface-level characteristics associated with powerful first impressions of Web site credibility.”

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8 In his research, Sundar identifies this as the MAIN Model.
Additionally, he contends that these affordances are “richly meaningful from a psychological point of view” (79). Sundar’s research suggests that the same affordances can lead to different responses from an audience. One user may see an affordance as denoting goodness or goodwill, but another user may perceive the same affordance as intrusive or distracting. Therefore, “It is very likely that a given affordance can convey a variety of different cues leading to a number of different heuristic-based judgments, with some being positive and others negative” (79). Sundar notes that this results in “a rather complex equation between the presence of an affordance and the nature of credibility assessments it can trigger” (79).

**Modality Affordance**

The first of these affordances is modality, which Sundar explains “is perhaps the most structural . . . of the four affordances and also the most apparent on an interface” (80). Sundar comments that many people confuse medium with modality. He emphasizes that the medium is the computer itself and observes that computer-based communication typically utilizes multiple modalities. For example, a website may employ text, sound, visual images, video, or any combination of these modalities. Warnick observes these combinations serve multiple purposes, and that “authors use many devices to hold their readers’ attention and keep them interested in what they say” (“New Media” 62).

Sundar claims each modality or combination of modalities signals its own response. He asserts that an audiovisual modality may trigger the realism heuristic and suggests “people are more likely to trust audiovisual modality because its content has a higher resemblance to the real world. That is, we trust those things that we can see over those we merely read about.” He attributes this to an underlying “general belief that pictures cannot lie (even in this day and age of digital manipulation) and the consequent trust in pictures over textual descriptions.” Sundar identifies a second advantage of multiple modalities in that they “are believed to extend the speed, range, and mapping of information with greater sensory involvement, thus enlarging the perceptual bandwidth for interaction.” His research demonstrates that increased sensory perception may cue the being-there heuristic such that “receivers feel like they are part of the universe portrayed by the digital media . . .” (Sundar, 81). Audiovisual modalities triggering the realism or being-there heuristics allow Internet church participants to tune into traditional cues suggesting trustworthiness, such as dress,
vocal mannerisms, arm gestures, etc. Sundar’s research shows that “triggering the realism and being-there heuristics, new modalities serve to heighten users’ perceptual experience with digital media, with generally positive consequences on credibility evaluations” (82). Internet churches triggering these judgments may allow church participants to move beyond the reality of their living room or office and into a new reality in which they worship and communicate with people from around the world.

Both LifeChurch.tv’s Church Online and Potential Church employ multiple modalities in their church services. Each has a video box on the left with synchronous sound and images. The video box frequently displays text with song lyrics, scripture, or main points from the sermon. Each has a chat box on the right that incorporates text (see Figure 10 and 11). Additionally, both churches incorporate graphic images elsewhere on the site with multiple hypertext options. Church participants can choose to view the chat function or to take notes. My first exposure to Church Online and Potential Church did not trigger either the being there or reality heuristics. The novelty of the Internet church and my research project compelled me to click on every link as I listened and watched. I entered into the chat. I took notes online. I read the lyrics to worship songs on the screen. Rather than making me feel like I was “part of the universe portrayed by the digital media,” the multiple modalities and requirement to make choices about how to use these options planted me firmly in my office. There were simply too many modalities competing for my attention. As a result, I questioned the credibility of these Internet churches. It is important to note I did not question the messages communicated by these churches, but the services themselves.

Apparently, there can be too much of a good thing. Sundar asserts that multiple modalities do not always trigger the realism heuristic and that “sensory overstimulation experienced during multimodal interactions could just as well cue the distraction heuristic” when the experience leaves a user “cognitively drained” (81). As a result, Internet churches with too many modalities may “detract users from effortfully evaluating the content of communication” (81), and generate lack of credibility. Additionally, pop-ups, animation, and sound may produce negative judgments; these “[m]odalities that command user attention and arrive unsolicited are usually unwelcome and serve to trigger the intrusiveness heuristic” (82). Frobish warns that anything which draws attention to the medium rather than the message will display a lack of concern for the audience as well as a lack of knowledgeability
Figure 10. Church Online Church Service. May 21, 2011 6:22 p.m. PST. Image adapted from Church Online.

Figure 11. Potential Church service. May 22, 2011 7:19 a.m. PST. Image adapted from Church Online.
because site visitors measure “[o]nline competence . . . by [a] group’s ability to accentuate the message while minimizing the role of the messenger” (44).

Sundar reflects that young people may have a greater threshold than adults for multimodal presentations because “they have grown up on a regular diet of complex media interfaces” (81). Additionally, adults spending significant time on the Internet may become accustomed to these interfaces and may find them less cognitively draining. However, Wathen and Burkell point out that website credibility increases as users experience more time online (135). Certainly, my own perceptions changed over time as I familiarized myself with these Internet church sites, and I began to view them more positively. Church Online’s Dynamic Prerecorded format allows a montage of prerecorded video elements that emulate the one-hour service structure of the physical campuses. Musicians tape multiple worship segments two to three times a year. Videographers tape segments with Brandon Donaldson, the Church Online Campus Pastor so that he can address church participants directly. Because these elements are prerecorded, technicians can edit videos, eliminating problems with quality. This format, combined with the chat function that demonstrates a group of participants viewing and experiencing the service simultaneously, may trigger either the real-time or reality heuristic, increasing credibility judgments. Additionally, when Internet church participants learn to take customize their experience, taking advantage of the different modalities, they may develop a perception that the church is trustworthy because it demonstrates concern for the needs of its visitors.

The distraction heuristic may be triggered by drawing attention to the medium rather than the messenger through multimodal difficulties. During one visit, on May 15, 2011, the live stream from Potential Church video froze a total of 23 times over an hour and 45 minutes.\footnote{The screen froze every time I visited Potential Church. On the morning of Sunday, May 15, 2011, it froze at 6:07, 6:12, 6:17, 6:21, 6:26, 6:30, 6:39, 6:44, 6:47, 6:51, 6:58, 7:02, 7:07, 7:10, 7:14, 7:17, 7:24, 7:27, 7:32, 7:36, 7:38, 7:41, and 7:45.} Every time it froze, the online experience was interrupted, and I was reminded that Potential Church was in Florida, and I was in San Diego, California. Additional distractions included grainy images prior to the start of the images and sound that went in and out. These
technological distractions demonstrated lack of concern for the Internet audience, hindering a positive credibility judgment.

**Agency Affordance**

As has been mentioned previously in this chapter, identification of the source in computer-based media can be difficult. Sundar asks, “Is the source of online news a Web site? Or is it the computer itself? Is it the author of the story? Or it could be the news organization that was responsible for putting together a given piece of news?” (83). He concludes that all of these can be considered sources and suggests that “the agency affordance capitalizes on this confusion” (83), allowing credibility judgments about the source to be determined in new ways. According to Flanagin and Metzger, “processes of social endorsement . . . have always been central to credibility” and “endorsed credibility in the digital media environments compensates for the relative anonymity of tools like the Web” (10) and difficulty in judging a source. Sundar observes that when the *New York Times* website features a listing of the most e-mailed stories of the day, even more users read those stories. He reports that including this with a news story information triggers the bandwagon heuristic. This judgment assumes that “if others think that this is a good story, then I should too” (83). Sundar notes, “The bandwagon heuristic can be quite powerful in influencing credibility given that it implies collective endorsement and popularity of the underlying content” (84).

Visitors to Church Online can click on a world map showing the real-time location of everyone participating in the service (see Figure 12). Additionally, Church Online names countries with visitors participating in that service. This type of technology triggers judgments related to the bandwagon heuristic, and site visitors may decide that the more participants a given church has, the more likely it is to be a credible source for spiritual information. Frobish observes religious organizations can “establish religious legitimacy and authority by emphasizing a large number of supporters or showcasing a large network of affiliated groups” (42). He specifies that this type of authority strengthens the appearance
that a group’s “intelligence or knowledge has helped individuals or the larger community” (42). 10

Both Church Online and Potential Church have Facebook links on their sites, allowing participants to signal to friends that they are online, attending an Internet Church, and volunteer hosts on Church Online’s chat frequently Tweet phrases related to the sermon at the start of Church Online services, modeling this behavior for other participants. Frobish indicates that this “credibility by association may be key for some groups” (42) in developing a perception of wisdom and knowledgeability along with authority. Both churches have Facebook pages, allowing them to communicate with participants on a daily basis, and Sundar notes “the presence of counters on home pages, indicating the number of visitors to the site may trigger heuristics related to popularity” (78), again triggering the bandwagon

10 Potential Church also had a map when I first visited the church in October 2009. However, that features is no longer present on the site.
heuristic. Both have a large number of followers,\textsuperscript{11} indicating popularity, authority, knowledgeability, and trustworthiness. Frobish observes that if religious organizations “can demonstrate that they retain a community of followers who believe or trust in them, they may be more successful attracting outsiders and sustaining current members” (42). For Internet churches, this may construct a perception that the churches can be trusted, leading them to listen closely to the messages communicated during the church services.

Sundar observes that an important means of determining credibility is whether or not a source “is an official authority or not” (84). The \textit{authority heuristic} may be triggered through autogenerated source cues the source is identified as an expert or official authority. He notes this heuristic may be triggered when the Web site itself that identifies itself as an authority. Sundar explains that this heuristic “is likely to directly confer importance, believability, and pedigree to the content provided by that source and thereby positively impact its credibility” (84). As discussed previously, Potential Church highlights the TroyGamling.com website on its homepage and signals that he can be seen on the Fox television network, conferring authority and knowledgeability on its lead pastor. However, Frobish suggests that this type of appeal, if overly emphasized, may be seen as conceit rather than conferring authority because it violates expectations of modesty in religious organizations. Frobish also notes, “offering textual materials like doctrine or teachings can build authority” (43) and demonstrate knowledgeability. The websites of both LifeChurch.tv and Potential Church include information about doctrine. Additionally, LifeChurch.tv offers YouVersion, an free online Bible with 142 versions in 50 languages that allows users to share notes about scriptures passages with each other.

Sundar asserts that the source does not always need to convey authority in order to influence perceptions of credibility. In fact, an organization can do this through what he identifies as “social presence, or the idea that the user is communicating with a social entity rather than an inanimate object” (84). He conveys that the \textit{social presence heuristic} may “aid

\textsuperscript{11} On June 14, 2011, Potential Church had 4,645 followers; LifeChurch.tv had 46,702. It should be noted that these numbers include people who attend the physical campuses as well as the people who attend the Internet churches. However, this differentiation is insignificant because the numbers themselves emphasize authority.
credibility of socioemotional information content,” (85) and certainly Internet churches fall into this category. Both Church Online and Potential Church include a chat box hosted by volunteers who frequently offer helpful information about how to use the site. Additionally, they greet church participants if they log in, respond to concerns, and suggest additional resources. Church Online utilizes translation software to allow international visitors to communicate easily on the chat. These affordances demonstrate concern for participants, which may also trigger the helper heuristic; “manifested by such online behaviors as trusting and self-disclosure” (85). Additionally, Sundar theorizes the service heuristic may lead to an “automatic deduction that good service means good quality of information and information supply, thus leading to a high level of credibility” (79). Both the helper and service heuristics illustrate concern for church participants and provide a sense of goodwill. Church Online offers other affordances that may trigger these judgments. For example, fifty weekly online services allow church participants to attend a service at a convenient time, an advantage of Dynamic Prerecorded Churches over Live Stream Churches. When users click on the time schedule for Church Online, an affordance lists the times in the user’s time zone. Lyrics on the screen help church participants sing along or at least think about the words, and links to iTunes helps them access the songs if they choose. Each of these affordances signify that Church Online anticipates the needs of its participants.

**Interactivity Affordance**

Sundar suggests that “the term interactivity implies both interaction and activity” and asserts that opportunities to interface with a website trigger the activity heuristic. He observes this heuristic “indicates a departure from the passivity that characterizes usage of traditional media, especially television” (85). Commenting on services broadcasted on the Vatican website, Frobish observes that without interactivity they produce an “asynchronous mode that distances [participants] from other users, parishioners, and priests” (66). Interactivity bridges that distance, cueing the being-there heuristic and constructing greater trustworthiness. Without interactivity, the broadcast is nothing more than a novel way to watch a sermon. Interactivity is an essential piece of religion online, as described by Christopher Helland. Without interactivity, Internet churches fail to incorporate an essential biblical component of the Christian church, that is, spiritual community. In his book
SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World, a discussion of evangelical Christian Internet churches, Douglas Estes contends, “Being present seems to be a necessary ingredient for real community” (66). He observes that some churches offer podcasts of services, but notes, “if a worshiper shows up at a church website podcast, since there is no way to know if and when anyone else was ever there, there is no group presence and therefore no community” (66). He concludes his discussion stating that if a “group of people all show up at a website, but cannot in any way interact, then there is no community” (66). In essence, interaction is crucial to construction of community. Additionally, Flanagin and Metzger assert, “Group and social engagement . . . are crucial to credibility construction” (10). Lankes extends this discussion, noting the amount of information provided through digital networks and the necessity to render credibility judgments regarding that information. He contends, “there is pressure for the tools [Website visitors] use to incorporate some ability to participate, or engage with people and sources.” He observes that Website designers have responded by “creating more opportunity for user participation” (110).

Sundar theorizes that “the presence of interactivity . . . can transmit cues that imply a greater sense of dialogue in the system” (77), demonstrating inclusiveness and accessibility, which illustrate goodwill and community-mindedness. Additionally, “the ‘dialogue’ cue might give users the sense that the content is mutually shaped, serving as a trigger for a variety of heuristics relating to participation, democracy, consensus, and so on” (78). Both Church Online and Potential Church include a chat box, allowing participants to interact with each other. They greet each other, talk about the weather, and comment on the music or sermon. Moderators direct the conversation by introducing or repeating key scriptures or sermon points. Additionally, these monitors caution participants not to divulge personal information. They also warn participants who attempt to use the site as a way to initiate sexual conversations. These conversations allow these Internet churches to interact with participants, demonstrating concern for them, triggering the responsiveness heuristic, which leads to a sense of telepresence.

The dialogue does convey a sense of immediacy, increasing the likelihood of triggering the reality or real-time heuristic. This is particularly important for Church Online,
whose services are prerecorded. For example, I visited a service on the evening of May 22, 2011, the day after Harold Camping had predicted would mark the end of the world.¹² Church Online participants asked about the prediction several times. When “JenW” suggested that participants pray for “people that got sucked into this false teacher's nonsense,” the host suggested she pray. These real-time interactions also cue judgments that intensify the online experience and factor into credibility evaluations.

Church Online offers additional opportunities for limited interaction. These include clicking on buttons to signal agreement with statements during the sermon as well as filling in the blanks on the sermon notes provided on the site. At the end of the service, participants can click on the “raised hand” to respond to the altar call. Tim Hutchings asserts that this limited interactivity “creates a sense of participating without distracting from Groeschel’s message or offering space for dissent.” A numeral alongside the hand indicates the number of people who have responded, “creating the impression that great numbers of people are watching with the visitor and agreeing with all Groeschel has to say” (253). In this way, interactivity signals multiple judgments evoking trustworthiness.

**Navigability Affordance**

Sundar defines the navigability affordance as “interface features that suggest transportation from one location to another, in keeping with the space metaphors such as ‘site’ and ‘cyberspace’ applied to digital media (88). He observes, “Good navigability in digital media goes beyond simply providing hyperlinks in various forms” (89) and that most sites “feature navigational aids designed to orient users to the mediated environment and . . . [maximize] the efficiency of their experience” (89). He notes that “[a] clearly organized hierarchical layout of links . . . lends itself to an effortless visual search” (89) and prompts high user satisfaction. Additionally, Sundar reports that “these aids may cue the scaffolding heuristic, whereby [users] understand the role of the navigational aids as helping them” (89).

¹² Harold Camping, the founder of Family Radio, a network of radio stations with Christian programming, predicted a catastrophic worldwide earthquake at 6:00 p.m. on May 21, 2011, signaling the return of Jesus Christ. Although most evangelical Christians scoffed at his predictions, a significant number quit their jobs to encourage non-Christians to repent. Many others were simply confused.
of the designer” (89). For Internet churches, this cues judgments of helpfulness and concern for church participants, indicating qualities of goodwill or virtue. Sundar asserts that improvements in “clarity, understandability, and appearance of the environment” all increase credibility. Frobish notes the importance of navigability in engendering trust and asserts, “Well-designed sites should present information that is accommodating to all users and their needs” (64). In this way, easily navigable sites demonstrate practical wisdom as well as concern for the community.

Navigation is fairly simple for both Church Online and Potential Church. A simple click takes a participant from the home page of the church to the church page. Visitors to Church Online can access the church site when services are not in session. Once there, they can explore all aspects of the church service except the chat. In addition, they can choose to access a video offering a preview of the current sermon series. When church services are in session, participants have easily labeled options to disable the chat or the video. If participants have a slow Internet connection, they can view the service in “low quality.” All of these options demonstrate a desire on the part of Church Online to meet the needs of its audience, whatever they may be. Visitors to Potential Church cannot access the site unless church is in session. The hyperlink is disabled at all other times. On two occasions, I logged onto the Potential Church site at service time, but was unable to enter the site until approximately five minutes after the service started. Frobish notes this “lack of accessibility” may disinterest visitors. Certainly, it does not suggest online competence, practical wisdom, or concern for church participants.

**CONCLUSION**

This discussion of the importance of surface design and technology in establishing trustworthiness in Internet churches does not exclude the importance of conveying qualities of virtue, goodwill, and wisdom through the content of the church services themselves, through the sermons, the artwork, and supplementary videos. It also does not exclude the importance of audience receptiveness to the message. Wathen and Burkell maintain that message familiarity increases perceptions of trustworthiness as do audience expectations of church (135). However, this chapter demonstrates that Internet churches must carefully
consider all aspects of design and technology in order to establish that they and their messages can be trusted.
CHAPTER 4

WORSHIPING GOD ONLINE: THE
CONSTRUCTION OF SPACE AND PLACE IN
INTERNET CHURCHES

In Architecture for Worship, E. A. Sovik reflects that in the “Roman Empire, where a
great variety of religions existed and a multitude of deities, each with its shrines, temples,
altars, and holy places, the Christians saw themselves uniquely as a community of
faith unattached to any place” (13). Furthermore, in the New Testament, the Greek word
ekklesia, translated church, does not indicate a building, but denotes the community of people
“everywhere who call on the name of [the] Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:3 NIV).
Sovik claims that this perception changed when Roman Emperor Constantine
institutionalized the church in 312 C.E. and Christianity spread across Europe. As the
community of Christians grew, cathedrals were built for the purpose of worship, and the term
church came to include the building housing that worship. It is not surprising that the term
“church” began to refer to the place where the Church gathered to worship rather than to the
people themselves. Ananda Mitra observes, “It would not be incorrect to say that in many
ways human beings are in some ways ‘hardwired’ to think spatially” (1).

This tendency has extended to descriptions of the World Wide Web, and Mitra and
Rae Lynn Schwartz identify physical metaphors for the Internet, including the information
superhighway and cyberspace. Additionally, they note, we “visit” a web site. They
conclude, “The traditional way of thinking of space and place thus permeates the discussion
of the Internet as well as impacting the way in which the Internet has entered the popular
culture.” Narushige Shioede and Tomoko Kanoshima acknowledge the same tendency,
noting, “Architects, urban planners and designers . . . tend to think of cyberspace as a new
dimension of the living environment” and “anthropologists, psychologists and specialists in
other social sciences see cyberspace as a new realm of social activity or the cradle of cyber
culture” (2).
The use of the metaphor of “space” and “place” for the internet shapes the way we view the Internet, and architectural theorist Neil Leach asserts that “architectural form can be seen to be the result of deeper concerns.” He illustrates this claim by citing Siegfried Kracauer, who theorized, “Spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphics of any spatial image are deciphered, there the basis of social reality presents itself” (5). In essence, the structure of space reflects the basis of any community. In The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace, Margaret Wertheim contends cyberspace is a non-physical space allowing people to connect with ideas of the spiritual, immaterial world that have often been silenced by the dualistic cosmology of Western science (33). Based on this argument, Campbell asserts that “just as the gothic cathedrals of Europe were constructed with a distinct architecture . . . and symbolic meaning . . . so the designers of online spaces can use the technology to create forms that link to the images of the sacred” (“Spiritualising” 11), even shaping perception of the sacred.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the role of sensory elements such as sound and images, combined with textual element, in constructing a sense of space for Internet church participants and to examine the way this construction of space communicates the values of these Internet churches. As part of this project, I will be examining two of the internet churches introduced in the first chapter. The first is St. Pixels, the online-only church sponsored by the Methodist Church in Great Britain, and the second is Church Online, the Internet campus of LifeChurch.tv.

I will first review the objectives of each internet church, as stated on the website, and then describe services visited in December 2010. I will then direct my attention to description of the actual church services and the use of images and sounds in those services, as well as the ways these elements combine with text to construct a sense of place for participants. Finally, drawing from Richard Kieckhefer’s argument that the aesthetic elements of church architecture, including spatial dynamics, centering focus, aesthetic impact, and symbolic resonance, communicate church values and meaning, I will explore the role the use of these elements and the role they play in illustrating the values and theological understanding of God and humanity held by these churches.
ST. PIXELS CHURCH OF THE INTERNET

As described in the first chapter, Church of Fools, an image-rich virtual church experiment closed its doors due to lack of funding after only four months, but “the community that developed out of the experience was unwilling to let the attempt die” (Kluver and Chen 116). The chat rooms continued, and in 2006, the United Methodist Church of Britain established a second online church, St. Pixels, “focusing first on spiritually rich content, and secondarily on digital technologies” (116). Without the technological or financial means to create virtual stone cathedrals, the resulting church community focused primarily on textual communication.

The vision of St. Pixels, as stated on the website, in very simplistic Arial font, listed in bullet points is:

- To create a sacred space; a welcoming and witnessing community on the internet.
- To make disciples by providing opportunities for theological reflection, discussion and exploration.
- To proclaim Christ through the use of the internet and related technologies.

In order to achieve this, they state they will:

- Work to build an ecumenical and international St Pixels community that is part of the Body of Christ.
- Develop and use software and other available media that enable community to flourish.
- Work with other Christian groups with a presence on the Internet on issues of shared interest. (“Our Vision”)

A link at the bottom of the home page takes you to “Core Values,” which details expected behavior on the site. These guidelines, detailed as directives, in the imperative mode, are set in place to preserve a sense of safety on the Internet, to maintain tolerance and diversity, as well as constructive dialogue. Another link presents St. Pixels’ beliefs, which establish the centrality of Christianity, but do not provide specific theological beliefs:

God is revealed to seekers by many different means, including creation, the Bible, the life of Jesus and the Spirit-filled witness of the Church. St Pixels is one expression of that historical, international and universal Church. We aim to create sacred space on the Internet where we can seek God together, enjoy each other's company and reflect God's love for the world. Those of any belief or none are welcome to take part in our activities, providing they accept the Christian focus of our community and respect other participants. (“Our Vision”)
St. Pixels acknowledges that this belief statement is less than concrete, stating:

We recognise that this does not go as far as some Christians would want it to. However, at St Pixels we are intentionally ‘vague’ because we want as many people as possible to feel part of the community. . . . Instead, we are a community that aims to embrace people from all these traditions and provide opportunities for them to seek God together. (“Our Beliefs”)

This statement allows ecumenical participation, and as a result, members of St. Pixels come from many religious denominational backgrounds, and the services and discussions on the site reflect those backgrounds. Indeed, the lack of images referencing specific beliefs or ideology promotes this broad inclusionary philosophy.

After my initial research, I continued to follow St. Pixels on Facebook and in summer 2010, I saw a status report announcing an update to the site. However, when I returned to the site in November 2010, I saw only minimal changes to the home page. The image of cartoon avatars was gone, and the site no longer identified the number of monthly visitors. Although most information about St. Pixels can be accessed by anyone, visitors can only read blogs and discussion boards if they register and log in. Similarly, they must register and log in to attend services. St. Pixels still relied primarily on text to communicate information. After a year’s absence, I had forgotten my registration information, and I found no link to get a reminder. I re-registered using a new name. I reviewed service times and returned a few days later.

Services now take place on the Expressions page, which is identical to the old Sanctuary. The left part of the screen, occupying approximately 60 percent of the space, is devoted to textual chat for participants. The participant’s screen name and cartoon avatar appears, followed by the conversation typed in the space below the chat. The right-hand side of screen is also divided into two sections. The frame in the top half displays images or text related to the sermon, and visitors can choose what they want to see in the bottom half of the screen, either the names of church rooms (the porch, the belfry, the sanctuary) and the number of visitors in each room, or the names of participants present in a room (see Figure 13).

On December 12, 2010, I arrived at the Expressions page at 12:41 p.m. San Diego time, 8:41 p.m. in the United Kingdom. Participants gathered at the “Porch” prior to service.
Sanderella, the moderator for the evening, was already there. She greeted me, and we began a conversation about 85-degree California weather, which she believed was much too warm. She told me she had visited San Diego once before. She indicated she was looking forward to a holiday trip to Lindisfarne, an island off the coast of Britain. She posted an image of the island in the upper right-hand frame so that I could “see” what she was referencing. As we waited for the service to begin, several members of St. Pixels arrived and we reviewed the history of Henry VIII. Sanderella “popped out” to load her presentation in the Sanctuary, and then “popped” back in to call us all to service. I followed her there as did most of the site participants. Some stayed behind in the Porch room.

The white frame in the upper right-hand corner contained text: “Welcome to St. Pixels Expressions. There will be sound, pictures and text, so please adjust your settings accordingly. You may repeat anything that is written in CAPITAL LETTERS on the command sound.” Although there is normally no sound on the St. Pixels website, a moderator may choose to use sound in the sanctuary during services. I have attended services read aloud by both American and English moderators as well as services led silently. Frequently moderators include responsive readings, and site participants respond as
described previously, prompted by capital letters. On this date, Sanderella chose to present her message textually.

Sanderella began by posting a prayer into the upper right-hand frame: “We begin with a short prayer….As our evening prayer rises before you, O God, so may your mercy come down upon us to cleanse our hearts and set us free to sing your praise now and forever. AMEN.” Each site participants typed “Amen” into the command box on the left. I visited St. Pixels during Advent, and each day moderators introduced a different character from the story of Jesus’ birth. Sanderella introduced the donkey, and we read G.K. Chester’s poem titled “The Donkey” together silently. Site participants bantered back and forth. Jolie greeted the donkey, typing in, “hello donkey : )” (see Figure 14). Explorer 1 responded by typing in, “Good morning, Mr. donkey.” Stevens said, “Hi ass.” Jeff called out, “eeyore.” Sanderella typed in a smile. During the reading of the poem, the screen was silent.

Figure 14. “Expressions Screen.” Adapted from St. Pixels December 12, 2010 1:10 p.m. PST.
At the close of the poem, she posted a picture of the donkey in the upper frame, and the banter resumed. Explorer1 asked how long it took the donkey to learn to use Expressions, and Sanderella responded that she held his hoofs while he typed. She posted a call to prayer in the upper frame, and participants said farewell to the donkey: “Gracias, Mr. donkey.” “Thanks, donkey.” “Cheers, big ears.” “Ta ass.”

Prayer time plays a large role in St. Pixels. Sanderella posted. The upper right-hand frame reads, “We now have an open time of prayer. Please use this time to be quiet before God and bring any concerns to him. You may type your prayers in the command line if you wish or say them privately in your heart.” Immediately the tone changed became serious as site participants posted their prayers: “our armed forces and families and loved ones,” “persecuted Christians everywhere,” “for the homeless,” “all our real life churches,” “for the many who can’t find work,” “doctors, nurses, and all those who have to work over Christmas.” They prayed for a site participant who could not fly home because of the weather and another who had recently had surgery. They prayed for family members by name. At this moment, each cartoon avatars became a real person, with real needs, praying for those needs and the needs of the other people in the Expressions room. After some time, the screen became silent, and Sanderella posted, “Lord, in your mercy, HEAR OUR PRAYERS.” Participants responded to the prompt and typed “Hear our prayers” into the command box. Sanderella closed by posting the Lord’s Prayer into the upper right-hand frame, and participants typed parts of the prayer into the command box.

**LIFECHURCH.TV AND CHURCH ONLINE**

As discussed previously, LifeChurch.tv, a multisite congregation, was one of the first churches to venture into the internet campus world, and it has the same goals for its Internet church as it does for its physical campuses. The website describes these goals, stating, “LifeChurch.tv wants to make a lasting difference in your life, in our community, and the world. How do we go about that? By leading people to become fully devoted followers of Christ. That’s the driving purpose behind everything we do.” Next to this text, an embedded video features Craig Groeschel, who looks directly into the eyes of the viewer, greets the viewer and describes the mission of the church. He says, “We’re not about a denomination. We’re not about the buildings. We’re not about some kind of fancy religious organizational
structure.” He invites the viewer to “browse around on the website” and to attend a physical campus if they live near one, or to attend Church Online.

The screen for Church Online is divided into two halves, with the left side divided into top and bottom. The top left contains prerecorded elements to the church service. The bottom half is reserved for additional information. The right-hand side of the screen contains the chat section, monitored by hosts and captains who greet guests as they sign in, who encourage conversation, and provide additional information about Church Online:

```
@Dustin  Host  Welcome to Church Online! If this is your first time here we suggest you check out http://lifechurch.tv/who-we-are ! Thanks for coming!

Dee S. Host  Sam: We have some volunteers and people who would love to talk to you more about that in live prayer. It's sometimes hard to talk about some of these deeper issues in the chat, and keep focus on the message :)

@Dustin  Host  Thank you all for joining us today! We are praying for each of you! If you want to know more about Church Online we suggest you check out http://lifechurch.tv/who-we-are ! Until next time everyone be blessed... and remember Whoever Finds God, Finds Life!
```

These volunteers, who come from all around the country, and even around the world, shape the space in Church Online, creating a sense that a community of people have gathered to experience the same event.

The actual service, displayed in the top left segment of the screen, consists of a montage of prerecorded elements, which recreates the one-hour service structure of the physical campuses (see Figure 15). In an interview with Hutchings, Brandon Donaldson, the Church Online campus pastor, explains that this “careful reproduction of the familiar” (70) is a theological decision. He states, “The Internet Campus gives us the opportunity to be part of what God is doing.” Certainly, this construction gives Church Online participants a connection to the physical world, as they hear the same sermon as the congregants at physical campuses and around the world.

Each service starts with the same prerecorded video of flashing lights and music. This code signals the beginning of the service. Chat participants express excitement. A worship leader in the top left frame welcomes participants. He or she will lead participants in songs of praise to God. The bottom left frame identifies the worship leader and where he or she is from. Although most worship leaders come from the Oklahoma area, some come
from elsewhere in the United States and even from other countries. Occasionally, well-known Christian musicians lead worship at Church Online. The bottom left frame also indicates what band originally performed the song and provides a link i-Tunes so that Church Online participants can purchase the music. The lyrics appear on the screen so that participants can sing along if they want to.

On Saturday, December 11, Joel Limpic, a worship leader from Bridgeway Church in Oklahoma City, led worship. A blue light lit the dark stage as Joel read one of the psalms from his i-Phone and described songs as “prayers wrapped in melodies.” He and the band began singing a song familiar to many Christians: “How Great Thou Art.” This version included an updated rock beat with acoustic and electric guitars, drums, bass and three vocalists. Limpic and his band wore jeans, plaid button down shirts or T-shirts, and athletic shoes. Camera angles changed, sometimes focusing on individual instruments, sometimes on individual musicians, and sometimes on the entire band (see Figure 16). Limpic closed his eyes; he was not looking directly at the audience because he was singing to God and not...
Church Online participants, signaling to participants that they too can sing directly to God. The music was CD quality with perfect harmonies and mix.

The montage of prerecorded video elements conceptually indicates that the worship segment was recorded immediately preceding the sermon. However, Church Online’s worship segments are all prerecorded. Once or twice a year, worship leaders gather at the Oklahoma City Campus, where pastor Craig Groeschel’s preaches live, and where sermons are recorded to be used at future Church Online services. The Internet community is invited to be part of this event, and free tickets are distributed so that the room is filled, further giving a sense of continuity, the sense that the music was recorded immediately preceding the sermon.

Following the worship segment on December 11, 2011, a pastor from Slovakia greeted Church Online participants. He stood in front of snow-covered nineteenth-century European buildings and acknowledged the global audience, “I don’t know where you are, perhaps you are in California . . . or Africa . . .” He led participants in prayer and closed his
eyes. “Let’s pray,” he said, “Dear Father, we thank you that today we can open our hearts, and you can do something new in our lives. You can show us new and exciting things, new understanding.” Church Online frequently incorporates videos from international ministries, once again establishing that no matter where participants are physically located, they have entered a new space that exists beyond that physical location, and they have joined a community of people to share something new.

Immediately following this segment, the Church Online Campus Pastor appeared in the screen. He thanked the pastor from Slovakia by name, explained the Church Online site, and prayed for the service. This was followed by an introductory video, the same one that introduced the sermon series when the services were not in session. The next video featured lead pastor Craig Groeschel, who looked directly into the camera and introduces the guest speaker, affirming that this message has meant a great deal for him. At the close of the service, Groeschel returned to the screen to affirm the message and to offer an “invitation” to those who wanted to make a decision to “follow Christ” (see Figure 17). In the bottom left-hand side of the screen, participants could click on an icon of a raised hand to signify that they made that choice. As participants click on the raised hand, a counter records the number of hands raised. Once again, Church Online demonstrated through use of montage and through images that participants were gathered together, in a space, experiencing the same event.

This segment was recorded in advance. However, the response below the video is live. This combination of live and prerecorded elements provides a sense of continuity. The worship band, the campus pastor, Groeschel, the guest speaker, and participants have gathered together, to worship God, on the same date, at the same time.

Three final segments closed out the service. Brandon Donaldson, the Church Online campus pastor, returned and encouraged participants to request a “What’s Next” kit, which provides participants with a Bible and other literature. Participants could access the kit online, or if they preferred, they could receive a physical copy mailed to their homes. Donaldson then prayed for the offering and explained how participants could give online. A video segment told the story of a man whose life changed through the ministry of LifeChurch.tv.
These types of narratives frequently accompany the offering, and the protagonist of the video looks directly into the camera, inviting participants to identify with the ideas communicated. Men and women of all ages and ethnicities are highlighted, and occasionally the narrative tells the story of a Church Online participant. Church Online’s video segments and stories tie together the real world campuses with the Church Online campus, illustrating a global community, connected regardless of physical location. This particular service closed with a teaser video highlighting Christmas services.

Throughout Church Online services, on the screen and in the chat, participants are invited to extend the Church Online experience by joining a Life Group meeting offline or online, by creating watch parties and inviting people to watch services together in a physical setting, and organizing Meet Up groups throughout the country and around the world. LifeChurch.tv wants participants to live as devoted followers of Jesus Christ, as defined by its understanding of theology, and Christian community is part of that understanding.
ARCHITECTURE OF INTERNET CHURCHES

In *Theology in Stone*, Kieckhefer argues that the architecture of a church plays a role in communicating its purpose and theology. He proposes that scholars examining the messages communicated by church structures should consider four architectural elements: (1) the spatial dynamics of the church; (2) its centering focus; (3) its aesthetic impact; and (4) its symbolic resonance. Kieckhefer recalls that Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann’s classic essay on early churches identified purpose, meaning, and form as the primary elements of church architecture and asserts that the “spatial dynamics and centering focus of a church might be said to express its purpose, its symbolic resonance might be said to express its meaning, and its aesthetic impact could be assimilated to its form” (10). However, Kieckhefer observes that Deichmann’s categories apply only to the “intentions of the builders” (11) and not to the “appropriation of churches by generations that view and respond to them, use them and often refashion them” (11).

Similarly, Marisa Ponti and Thomas Ryberg argue there is “great flexibility” in virtual spaces because of “their potential sense of transience and impermanence,” which “play a role in shaping the way routines and rituals are formed” (1). This flexibility “requires participants to engage in a process of re-creation of meanings to cope with the involved uncertainties and not rely on a passive process of simple acknowledgement of the new place” (1). As such, Internet services are continually shaped by the people who inhabit the spaces.

The participants of both St. Pixels and Church Online contribute to the shape and the sense of place for each church. The leaders of St. Pixels continually shape and reshape the function of the site. Participants can join the leadership after being active for six months. They take turns leading the evening services. Although Hutchings describes Church Online as a “well-funded, tightly controlled and institutionally-owned” (66) site, and although its large staff produces the professional artwork, video, and technological elements, volunteers staff the chat section, the online Life Groups, the real world Meet Up groups and watch parties, encouraged by Church Online employees. These volunteers also shape the essence of the place known as Church Online.
Three Types of Traditional Churches

Kieckhefer applies his theory about the function of these four architectural elements to three types of traditional churches (see Table 1). He first defines the purpose of these churches:

- **Classic Sacramental Churches** emphasize traditional sacraments, including baptism, communion, and marriage. Examples of sacramental churches include Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Anglican churches, although more modern examples of these faith traditions may not incorporate the architecture of the classic sacramental church. Many of these churches incorporate a “basilican plan, a long structure with lower aisles on either side and an apse at the end” (11). Kieckhefer observes that the spatial dynamism of the classic sacramental church, with its longitudinal space and high ceilings, allows for dramatic processions and return, from one end of the church to the other. The central focusing point of the church is the altar. Kieckhefer asserts, “If a church of this time is based on a coherent aesthetic vision, it is usually one meant to evoke the immanence of God and the possibility among worshipers for transcendence of ordinary consciousness” (11).

- **Classic Evangelical Churches** – The primary purpose of the classic evangelical church is “preaching the gospel.” Some of the earliest examples of these churches include sixteenth-century Huguenots and Dutch reformers, although Kieckhefer observes that nineteenth-century reformers revised the design and later modern evangelicals adapted the design again to include technology. He describes the interior as a small auditorium with the pulpit as the primary focal point. Thus, the words spoken from pulpit are the most important part of church services in classic evangelical churches. Kieckhefer observes the small space encourages “spontaneous interaction between preacher and congregation” (11).

- **Modern Communal Churches** – Kieckhefer observes that these churches may include both Protestant and Catholic congregations, and that this kind of church “is meant to emphasize the importance of gathering people for worship” and generally includes “ample space for social mingling at the entry.” Drawing on the architectural structure as evidence, he concludes that “the modern communal church is built for a congregation that is not already formed as a community in everyday life.” He notes that the atmosphere of these churches is meant to be “warm and inviting” in order to create a “hospitable environment for celebration” (12).

Next, Kieckhefer demonstrates how these elements apply to the churches (see Table 1).

I contend that these four elements, which are used to understand the messages communicated with actual structures, can be adapted for use in understanding the structure of Internet churches, which are most like “modern communal churches” in that the construction of space relies not only on technological structure, but on the development of community members who likely have not met in person.
Table 1. Basic Patterns in Church Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Classic Sacramental</th>
<th>Classic Evangelical</th>
<th>Modern Communal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liturgical use</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spatial dynamism</td>
<td>Longitudinal space</td>
<td>Auditorium space</td>
<td>Transitional space</td>
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<td>for proclamation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>dynamism)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centering focus</td>
<td>altar for sacrifice</td>
<td>pulpit for preaching</td>
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<td><strong>Response dictated</strong></td>
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<td>Aesthetic impact (immediate)</td>
<td>Dramatic setting</td>
<td>Dignified setting</td>
<td>Hospitable setting</td>
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<td>immanence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Symbolic Resonance (Cumulative)</td>
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<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
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<td>spatial dynamic</td>
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Note: Data adapted from *Theology in Stone*, by Richard Kieckhefer (15).

**Spatial Dynamism and Centering Focus**

Kress and van Leeuwen provide a means of interpreting the images in a scene, stating, “Composition . . . relates the representational and interactive meanings of the picture to each other through three interrelated systems” (183). Because these “three principles apply not just to single pictures,” but also to “composite visuals which combine text and image, and, perhaps other graphic elements, be it on a page or on a television or computer screen” (183), this system can be used to interpret the spatial dynamism of Internet churches.

The “information value” system endows certain elements with “specific informational values attached to the various ‘zones’ of the image, left and right, top and bottom, centre and margin” (Kress and van Leeuwen 183). Using this system, the left-hand side of a page is identified as the “Given,” meaning that it is something the viewer already knows, and the right-hand side is identified as the “New,” meaning “something which is not yet known, or
perhaps not yet agreed upon by the viewer.” Kress and van Leeuwen further define these information values, claiming, “For something to be New means that it is presented as something which is not yet known, or perhaps not yet agreed upon by the viewer, hence as something to which the viewer must pay special attention.” In contrast, “the Given is presented as commonsensical, self-evident” (188).

Kress and van Leeuwen maintain that if, “in a visual composition, some of the constituent elements are placed in the upper part, and other different elements in the lower part of the picture space or the page, then what has been placed on the top is presented as the Ideal, what has been placed at the bottom as the Real.” They define the nature of the Ideal, indicating for “something to be Ideal means that it is presented an idealized or generalized essence of the information” (193). The Real is denoted as providing specific information or practical, factual details.

For St. Pixels, the chat box is in the Given zone, indicating that the formation of community is expected. Participants cannot “lurk” in the church, and the entrance and departure of participants is signaled by bells as well as text on the screen indicating the name and status of that participant. Each participant is greeted by the others upon arrival. However, the sermon is in the upper right-hand corner, in both the New and the Ideal, indicating that this idealized material may be disputed, reemphasizing St. Pixels’ commitment to ecumenicism.

Church Online’s sermon is also in the Ideal segment of the screen, indicating that the information communicated in that frame leads to God. However, this frame is in the Given segment, indicating that this material is beyond dispute. Additional, practical information describing means of response to the given material is found below the Ideal. Participants can click on a link to receive off-screen prayer, to give to Church Online, or to request a What’s Next kit. The right-hand frame, including the Chat, includes the New, potentially disputed information.

Using Kress and van Leeuwen’s salience system, denoting the most important elements in the image based on “placement in the foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in tonal value . . . differences in sharpness” (183), to determine the centering focus of Internet Church architecture, we see that St. Pixels has two equally important sections, the chat on the left, which occupies the most space and includes the given that all participants
will enter into community, and the New and Ideal, the sermon, to which the community will respond. For Church Online, the most salient element is the prerecorded segment in the Ideal and Given quadrants. Synchronous and asynchronous sound emanate from this frame. Bright colors and movement highlight the action in this quadrant that exist nowhere else on the screen. Although community is valued in this environment, it is not required. Participants can enter into the service (or exit) without identifying themselves or without signing in. They may choose to interact with others, or they may choose not to.

**Aesthetic Impact and Symbolic Resonance**

Paul Emerson Teusner of RMIT University in Melbourne argues that the “creation of an alternative ‘space’ [is] done through the construction of aesthetic experiences” (125), and both St. Pixels and Church Online create aesthetic experiences, although these experiences differ greatly. Kieckhefer claims that “to inquire about the reaction a church evokes is to ask first about the immediate impact it makes on a person walking through the door: what aesthetic qualities come to the fore, and how do they condition the experience of the holy within the church’s walls” (10). Certainly, St. Pixels’ functional aesthetics, largely devoid of images and color, with uneven textual elements, did not immediately evoke any “experience of the holy.” Even though I had spent time on the site last year, I had difficulty finding the actual church space. I am accustomed to quick response when changing pages on the web, but this site loads slowly, causing frustration. I visited the church spaces several times over the course of the week, and I met no one within the “church walls,” as defined by the website. The church has international participation, but its headquarters are in the United Kingdom as are most of its members, and the time difference may account for the lack of traffic while I explored the site. A few times, as I lingered in the porch of the church, individuals popped in, presumably to see who else might be there, and they immediately popped out. I felt alone. Another time I entered the site and found people gathered for “coffee” before the 9:00 p.m. GMT Advent services. They offered me a “cuppa,” and I stayed for a few minutes to chat. These are warm, friendly people. I logged off, but returned for the next service.

In contrast to St. Pixels’ simple, empty home page, LifeChurch.tv’s website, with its warm colors and inviting images of men and women serving the community, presents a
welcoming space. I can click on links that describe the services, the purpose. An easy link on the bottom right-hand side of the page invites me to visit Church Online, and when I click on the link, I enter the actual church site. With more than fifty Church Online “experiences” per week, I may find an actual service. If not, the countdown clock lets me know the start time of the next service, using my time zone, identified from the IP address.

Rosalind Hackett observes that, when considering religion and the internet, the “combination of static and moving images and text, as well as aural and tactile forms of communication, lends it an aura of mystery” (68). However, after engaging in conversation with other participants, introducing myself, where I was from, learning about some of the other people, I felt like I truly had been someplace other than the office upstairs. Hackett claims the “endless possibilities of interactivity and connectivity” of the Internet “are both awesome and empowering, while many view the enabling capacities of computer-mediated communication (CMC) as emancipatory, even salvific” (68). Having visited both Church Online and St. Pixels today, I do feel empowered and freed of the limitations of physical space. I have “been to” the UK, inhabiting that time zone, speaking to people from the UK, Canada, and the United States. I have worshipped with people from more than 30 countries around the world at Church Online.

Simone Heidbrink and Nadja Miczek claim that when discussing the aesthetics, research has primarily considered “the production and perception of beauty within the fine arts” (2). However, they observe that Aristotle “reflects on the role of perception in the process of knowledge production” and that for Aristotle, the “perception is connected to processes of interpretation” (2). Thus, the construction of space, use of images and sound, or lack of images and sound inform the interpretation of these Internet churches. Although St. Pixels’ site is largely devoid of images and sound, this absence contributes to the construction of community space. Sociologist Theodor W. Adorno contends, “A sense of space is closely connected with purposes” (13). Certainly, St. Pixels’ construction and purpose privilege ecumenical community. In A Sense of the Sacred, Seasoltz notes, “One of the complex aspects of human life today in the Western world is that we have not one dominant culture but rather many diverse cultures that are regularly impinging on one another” (3). Specific images have the potential to function in an exclusionary way, and St. Pixels is primarily an inclusionary space.
On the other hand, Church Online uses images to unite participants and to frame discussions, bridging any barriers that might previously exist. Together, participants listen to the same music, watch the same message, identify with the speakers as they look directly into the camera, inviting the viewer to become a part of what is happening at LifeChurch.tv. S. Michael Halloran and Gregory Clark call attention to the rhetorical strength of “publicly significant place,” claiming, “As diverse individuals encounter such a place—one that ‘gleams’ with common meaning—they share a common rhetorical experience.” In another context, they might nothing in common, but while they are there in that place, they experience a sense of unity. Halloran and Clark conclude, “Place works rhetorically, then as ‘a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure and background for our collective existence’” (141).

Nevertheless, Hutchings observes that LifeChurch.tv. reflects both “the New Paradigm and Appropriator models of American Protestant churchmanship, characterised by the appropriation of elements of style and organization from secular culture” (76) in that they avoid use of religious images that might distract from the message. He explains that “New Paradigm churches adapt their environments and practices to abandon whatever might be alienating in their dress, words, music, worship or lifestyles and emphasize the personal, life changing challenge of their religious message” (76). Certainly, nothing in any of the images or videos denotes Oklahoma City. The worship band could be any upbeat band. The speakers dress casually, usually wearing jeans. Groeschel, a native of Oklahoma, lacks the twang associated with that region. Church Online’s very American culture is mitigated through the use of international worship leaders, greetings from pastors around the world, frequent guest speakers from Australia, and participants from around the world who can communicate through LifeChurch.tv’s instant translation software used in the chat. Church Online wants to extend its message “anywhere on the planet with an Internet connection” (Hall 48), and that purpose is communicated multiple ways in its construction of space.

Both St. Pixels and Church Online largely avoid the use of traditional Christian symbolism. For St. Pixels, this reflects their ecumenical philosophy. Church Online’s belief system is more defined, but the goal is to communicate a message and invite participants to join in Christian community. Certainly, the exclusion of traditional symbols does not exclude the development of the Internet church’s own symbols and codes, resulting in a
cumulative resonance as participants learn and understand the culture implied by those codes. Seasoltz claims that the use of symbols is essential since “culture is mediated through both verbal and nonverbal symbols, including myths, rituals, stories, and metaphors” (3). He warns that “[u]nless the symbols are cultivated and sustained, social structure are apt to collapse; they enable the social system to produce and reproduce. Without them chaos results because meaning becomes exclusively personal and privatized” (3).

Church Online employs multiple verbal, aural, and visual codes. The same music and images open each service. Multiple icons inhabit the space throughout the service, including the raised hand, inviting a response, the What’s Next kit logo, and the prayer link. Every service concludes with the same words, “Remember, whoever finds God, finds life.” Over time, these codes unite Church Online participants and increase the power of the messages communicated by LifeChurch.tv. As stated previously, Church Online wants to extend the worship experience, to encourage participants to establish online and offline Christian community. These codes and shared emotional experiences have the power to both cultivate and damage belief systems.

Unlike its predecessor, Church of Fools, St. Pixels employs very few codes, deliberately allowing for expansive interpretation of material presented. Participants communicate via blogs, discussion boards, and during services. However, Seasoltz claims that failure to use existing codes or to develop new codes may cause social structures to collapse as “meaning becomes exclusively personal and privatized” (3). This suggests the possibility that St. Pixels cannot maintain its community without them. Certainly, St. Pixels’ community is not as large as that of Church Online. The Facebook page for St. Pixels indicates 159 people “like” the page compared to more than 37,000 people on Church Online’s Facebook page. In October 2009, St. Pixels’ website indicated 291 people had visited the site that month. That information is no longer available at St. Pixels. Certainly, the number is far smaller than the 41,000 people who logged on to Church of Fools in a single 24-hour period back in 2004. It may be that this flexible structure, with very few codes, allows St. Pixels to develop unique communities that are less organized than those of Church Online.
CONCLUSION

In one sense, the developers of both St. Pixels and Church Online cite similar goals on their websites. Both hope to expand Christian thinking and mitigate the effect of secularization in the Western world, allowing the church to fulfill Christ’s mandate to “go into the world and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Both want to create sacred space on the Internet. Both want to construct community.

These churches share basic Christian beliefs, but they differ in the way they approach these beliefs. For example, the belief statement on St. Pixels’ website is intentionally vague in order to welcome as many people into their community as possible. A primary objective of St. Pixels is for the community to “seek God together.” In contrast, Church Online provides a detailed system of beliefs, identifying doctrines on specific topics such as the nature of God, the role of Jesus Christ, the presence of sin, and the plan for salvation from sin. They provide links to Scripture supporting these positions. Just as St. Pixels seeks fellowship with people who may have differing beliefs, Church Online warmly welcomes participants of other Christian traditions and other faiths in its services. However, the church firmly establishes some non-negotiable articles of faith and one of the purposes of the church service is to persuade site participants to follow these beliefs. Although the United Methodist Church in the United Kingdom sponsors St. Pixels, that information is not available on the St. Pixels website in order to avoid denominationalism. The church “aims to embrace people from all . . . traditions” (“Our Beliefs”). Church Online also avoids obvious references to a denomination, but its “Beliefs” page clearly acknowledges its denominational affiliation with the Evangelical Covenant Church, which it identifies as “a rapidly growing multi-ethnic denomination in the United States and Canada with ministries on five continents of the world” (“Beliefs”). Additionally, the Church Online website claims that the Evangelical Covenant Church “allows believers the personal freedom to have varying interpretations on theological issues that are not clearly presented in Scripture.” In this way, rather than avoid stating its denominational affiliation, it presents that affiliation as a positive aspect of the church, one that enables them to hold specific positions and yet welcome people who may disagree.

As demonstrated in this chapter through discussion of organization of websites as well as modality choices, the architecture of the spaces created by these two Internet
churches reflects these different approaches to theology. While both adhere to a distinctly Christian viewpoint and both value community formation, the construction of St. Pixels’ site privileges community formation over specific doctrines, stating

   We aim to create sacred space on the Internet where we can seek God together, enjoy each other’s company and reflect on God’s love for the world. Those of any belief or none are welcome to take part in our activities, providing they accept the Christian focus of our community and respect other participants. (“Our Beliefs”)

Although it is clear after spending time on the space that Church Online participants also seek God together and also enjoy each other’s company, the construction of the Church Online site privileges its own doctrine over the construction of community, reflecting their belief that “Whoever finds God finds life.”
WORKS CITED


