

Copyright

By

Nilo Lutero Figur

2013

The Dissertation Committee for Nilo Lutero Figur

certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

**Communication, Religion and the Internet:
A Case Study of Participants in an Online Christian Forum**

Committee:

Gene A. Burd, Supervisor

Joseph D. Straubhaar, Co-Supervisor

Stephen D. Reese

Rosental C. Alves

Donald Heider

**Communication, Religion and the Internet:
A Case Study of Participants in an Online Christian Forum**

By

Nilo Lutero Figur, B.S.; M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2013

Dedication

For my wife, Liane,
a true blessing of God in my journey of life,
whose, love, dedication, and persistent encouragement
have made this possible.

Acknowledgements

At the end of this long journey, I would like to offer my heartfelt gratitude to my dissertation committee, who patiently came along with me through all these years—beginning with my first advisor, Dr. Mark Tremayne, who left Austin for another campus to continue his career as a scholar. I am thankful to Dr. Don Heider, who agreed to continue as a committee member after leaving UT Austin, and today being a Dean at Loyola University Chicago. Thanks also to Dr. Stephen Reese, for what he represents, both academically to the University of Texas as a professor and as a personal friend to students, and particularly to me. I owe to Prof. Rosental Alves my appreciation for his persistent encouragement in overcoming various challenges along the way, as well as for his online experience, and for interacting with his team at the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas.

For their guidance in seeing this project through to its completion, I owe a very special acknowledgment to Dr. Joe Straubhaar and Dr. Gene Burd. As a co-advisor, Joe embraced my research project and wisely helped me go through with it, thereby his personal dedication, providing a wonderful example of interdisciplinary cooperation between his Department of Radio, Television & Film and the School of Journalism. And with his 50-plus years of academic experience, particularly in urban journalism, Dr. Burd constantly challenged me to find out if the “virtual” would supplant the “physical temple”, being always there and ready to work with me on what was

needed. The extra time and dedication from Dr. Burd and Dr. Straubhaar to my final work on the dissertation, especially through the entire summer, is deeply appreciated.

I wish to express my gratitude to my professors for their dedication—especially to Dr. Charles Whitney, my first Graduate Advisor and professor, and to Dr. Paula Poindexter, with whom I took my first classes and who later served as my Graduate Advisor. She was always encouraging me to continue on this road, as her academic excellence took her to the presidency of the AEJMC, an honor for the entire School of Journalism. I am also grateful to Dr. Max McCombs for the interesting class discussion on his Agenda-Setting theory applied to Latin America. To Dr. Nick Lasorsa and Dr. Thomas Johnson for sharing their academic knowledge and experiences, both in and outside class. Thanks also to current Graduate Advisor Dr. Renita Coleman, who has always been kind and ready to help.

I offer my sincere thanks to the School of Journalism staff for their support—to Janice Henderson, to former Graduate Coordinators Phillip Salazar and Lisa Jaskolka, as well as to the current Graduate Coordinator Sylvia Edwards, who gave a special and kind attention to my dissertation document process, going that extra-mile on it. I am thankful also to my many colleagues throughout the years for their friendship, care and collaboration.

I wish also to express my thanks to Concordia University Texas and to Lutheran Hour Ministries for their support, without which I could not have accomplished this degree. Thanks especially to Dr. Douglas Rutt and my colleagues at Lutheran Hour

Ministries. I am also grateful to Worthy Christian Forums—especially to George Whitten and Alan Emery, for welcoming me and opening doors for my research. Also my thanks and appreciation goes to the participants in the research, who gave me their time, opened their hearts, and shared their lives and spiritual experiences for this study.

My family has been a blessing to me throughout this endeavor. I am thankful to my wife Liane for all what she means for me, and to our three wonderful children—Raquel and granddaughter Lara, Regis, Rommel and our lovely daughter-in-law Ashley.

Finally, and above all, I am thankful to God for this unique real special blessing.

Communication, Religion and the Internet:
A Case Study of Participants in an Online Christian Forum

Nilo Lutero Figur, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

Supervisors: Gene A. Burd and Joseph D. Straubhaar

The Internet is affecting people's lives today through their personal and social relationships, professional activities, and their spiritual lives and religious practices. Academic studies in the field of communication and religion have been done frequently, but now in the digital era of social networks, studies are being directed to online religion on the Internet, which is ushering in a concept of digital religion.

This case study examined how participants in the online Christian Forum seek and/or benefit from their spiritual activities on the Internet. It used a qualitative approach with e-mail interviews in a growing religious activity online, showing the relationship and the impact of it on the users' spiritual/religious lives. As participants bring to their online religious practices their church or offline church experiences, most of them are actively involved in only their virtual or online community, in contrast to

previous studies that showed the Internet being used as a complement for offline church involvement.

Findings herein point to a strong faith/spiritual activity on the Internet in different sites and discussion forums. People are seeking online what they are not getting in their offline churches, relative to spiritual/Biblical content to aid their Christian faith, as well as for personal relationships in an online community. Thus study reveals a paradox in two areas of Christian faith practices online: the online experiences don't substitute for the offline church in worship and on face-to-face relationships as a community; and the participants miss those offline church experiences. Despite the fact that they miss them, they are not there physically, but practice their faith online. Participants in online Christian Forums in this study also revealed some distinctive individual/personal concepts about Christian doctrines and traditional historic practices which are not aligned with some specific beliefs and historical practices of the Christian church.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	xii
Chapter 1: Religion Practices Online	1
An Introduction.....	1
Social Media and Religion Online	7
Christian Forums Online	9
Worthy Christian Forums.....	13
Purpose of the Case Study	17
Outline of the Dissertation	18
 Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	 20
Church and Communication: From Printing to New Technologies	20
New Technologies and Religion Online	30
Interactivity and Religion Online	34
Christian Faith Practices Online.....	42
 Chapter 3: Method and Study Design	 47
Research Questions	47
From Facebook to Worthy Christian Forums	48
The Case Study.....	50
Methodology	54
Benefits of Interviewing.....	57
Interviewing by Email	58
Ethics on Interviewing	60
 Chapter 4: Data Analysis.....	 64
Participant Alpha	64
Participant Beta	85
Participant Gamma	98
Participant Delta	105
Participant Epsilon	110
Participant Zeta.....	117
Participant Eta.....	123

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion	130
Personal Introductory Note	130
Summary on Findings about Research Questions	132
Research Question 1.....	132
Research Question 2.....	135
Research Question 3.....	138
Research Question 4.....	143
Research Question 5.....	145
Research Question 6.....	149
Theoretical Conclusions Drawn from the Research Questions.....	153
1. Online and Offline Church.	153
2. Concept of Church	156
3. Learning About the Bible and Nurturing faith	159
4. Online Community	161
5. Concepts of Worship in Offline and Online Experiences.....	162
Conclusion.....	163
 Appendix	166
<i>Questionnaires</i>	166
Questions for participant Alpha	166
Questions for participant Beta	168
Questions for participant Gamma	170
Questions for participant Delta	172
Questions for participant Epsilon	174
Questions for participant Zeta.....	176
Questions for participant Eta.....	178
 Bibliography	180

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: One Body of Christ Experiment (All Christians on Facebook) 2	8
Figure 2: Accredited Online Bible College Homepage	10
Figure 3: Theology Online Homepage.....	11
Figure 4: Lampstand Christian Forum Homepage.....	12
Figure 5: Worthy Christian Forums Homepage.....	14

CHAPTER 1

Religion Practices Online

An Introduction

There is little doubt about the impact of the Internet in people's lives today, affecting different aspects and areas in their professional activities and personal relationships, including their spiritual life and religious practices.

This case study examined how participants in an online Christian Forum seek and/or benefit from their spiritual activities on the Internet. Through in-depth interviews by email, a group of seven very active members of an online Christian forums website were interviewed, to answer a general leading question of this dissertation, as on how and in what ways does the Internet affect the participants' religious experiences in online forums.

Religion online is not only an academic field of research, but relates to peoples' lives as part of their social relationships and culture, and in this particular case study, relates to the Christian churches and its members. Therefore my interest on this topic goes beyond an academic investigation in this field, and I hope it will contribute to both, the academic field and for Christian churches to perceive a reality of online religious practices and its meaning in the new digital age.

The development and use of new communication technologies has affected people in different dimensions, culturally, and in their religious beliefs and practices.

The changes in media technologies have even affected the dimensions of life. “Humans invent the technologies and content of mediated communication, but then the forms and substance of the media gain ascendancy over the manner in which large numbers of humans believe, feel, think, act, and react” (Real, 1989:23).

What Real saw starting to happen 20 years ago, Straubhaar and LaRose describe in “Media Now; Understanding Culture and technology:

Today the media are changing the world in many ways, in the rise of the Internet, the integration of communication technologies, shifting media empires, new lifestyles, challenging careers, changing regulations, shifting social issues, and a new dynamic power in society... (2006:4).

All of that has an impact in some way on people’s religious beliefs and practices. As churches seek to spread their message to individuals and to masses, communication becomes crucial for the achievement of their objectives. The development and study of communication has been important and we could say, it is crucial for the function of organizations and human relations in all levels of society, especially today, as part of an information-based-society. Churches therefore have applied principles of communication theories as well as new technologies in order to be more effective in accomplishing their goals of communicating with their member and growth in membership. Besides the use of radio and TV, the Internet has become an integral part of communication for the churches, churches, with their websites, blogs, Facebook pages, twitter, and so forth.

A story in the section of Miami Herald Technology (8/17/2013), describes an Anglican church in Roanoke, Va., with around 1,500 members, that has its own smart phone app designed to serve its membership, and in one year, the app has been downloaded 880 times. The app is powered by Subsplash, a software design company that makes apps for churches in the United States. According to the newspaper story, they have built several thousand apps for churches, and there are churches with more than 100,000 downloads.

The article quotes Heidi Campbell, Associate Professor at Texas University College Station, who studies the intersection of new media, religion and digital culture: "When they go to the Bible reading, they don't say pull out your Bible. They say pull out your smart phones," ...And they have the apps they recommend that you would download to get the readings of the week. But they expect people to be reading, following along, and taking notes on their iPhone. Some of them had a Twitter they might even be expecting them to tweet during the services" (http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/08/17/3559919_p2/va-church-goes-high-tech-to-spread.html#storylink=cpy).

Another news article from the New York Times on July 26, 2013 made reference about the number of people who is reading the Bible online. Making a parallel with a Bible text in the Gospel of John, author Amy O'Leary titles the article as "In the Beginning Was the Word; Now the Word Is an App". A free Bible app called *YouVersion* is changing how, where and when people are reading the Bible. The app, market simply as "Holy Bible", reached 100 million downloads this in July 2013. As pastors around the country are starting to use the iPads to preach, YouVersion servers track more than 600,000 requests every minute on Sunday mornings.

With the adoption of new technologies, the Internet is becoming an integral part of different religion experiences and their communication strategies and processes. The development of virtual communities or social networks is an important part of the analysis on how new technologies are being used and affecting people today. A growing online religious activity is in place, and in some ways challenging traditional religious faith practices across different religious groups. The massive access to new media technologies, that provides live interaction on a global setting, like the Internet especially, is affecting people's lives', which may include their spiritual experiences. The fact that the Internet is being increasingly used for religious purposes indicates that there is a possible spiritual dimension present in the use of that technology.

In the last two decades, there has been two opposite trends regarding religious practices in America. A decrease in traditional regular church attendance on one hand, and a growing number of people searching the internet for religious purposes on the other hand. The *Barna Research Group*, that follows religious and culture trends, found that "since 1991, the adult population in the United States has grown by 15%, and during that same period the number of adults who do not attend church has nearly doubled, rising from 39 million to 75 million – a 92% increase" (Mitchel & Marriage, 2003:213). As communication technology becomes part of people's religious or spiritual practices, it becomes also important to study not only the relationship

between communication technology and religious practices, but to what extent, and how the use of the Internet for religious practices is impacting people's lives.

A comprehensive study by the Barna Research Group, *Cyber Faith* (2001), found that over 100 million Americans were using the internet for religious purposes, and in a study *Faith Online*, (Hover et al., 2004) Pew found that 64% of American internet users were using it for religious purposes. This reveals a reality of an important aspect of our information-based-society related to religion practices.

There is an apparent spiritual need and reason for so many being driven to join virtual communities or social networks today. "The internet has become not only a place of social connection, but also one where individuals can seek out personal spiritual enhancement" (Campbell, 2005 p.53). Popular social networks like Facebook, MySpace, and others, show a variety of groups with thousands and even millions of members joining different religion groups seeking spiritual interests and benefits. So the Internet has become also a place "where ideas about God and religion can resonate, where faith can be shaped and defined by a collective spirit" (Chama, 1996:57).

In "Religious Facebook Pages Set Example In Engagement", an article on *allfacebook.com* of February 13, 2012, Brian Ward reports statistics showing that on Facebook "*Jesus Daily* remains in first place earning 5.6 million interactions. *Dios Es Bueno* is in second totaling a 2.2 million engagement total. *The Bible* received 1.6

million likes and comments, taking in the third position” (http://allfacebook.com/facebook-egagement_b77537).

Religion online has become in the last decade especially, a new area of study within the field of communication, a field which historically has been an interdisciplinary academic field dominated by to sociology, psychology, philosophy and others. There has been lately considerable work done on the field of religion and the Internet, or identified more specifically as religion online.

Heidi Campbell has been one of the most active and productive scholars in this new academic area of religion online. In “Framing the Study of Religion and the Internet” Campbell lists five key areas to understand the study of religion online. First, on the history of the religious use of the Internet, there is a variety of groups and churches from different traditions using the Internet. Second, she lists and describes the most common forms of religious activities online as being the search for information about religious music, messages/sermons, prayers, connection with others, which is confirmed by Pew’s “Faith Online” study report by Hoover, Clark, and Rainie (2004). Third, there are different forms of religion online, which includes websites, church activities, chat rooms, e-mail groups, online worship, rituals, and online religious communities. Fourth, a survey of research on religion and the internet shows the mid-1990s as the time when researchers started to focus on religion related to the studies of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), and people’s online

spiritual experiences. From there, a variety of studies developed in the field. As a fifth area to understand the study of religion online, Campbell identifies common themes in the area of religion online research, like theology or spirituality, religion, morality and ethics, practical or ministry applications, religious traditions, community, identity, authority or power, and ritual online (Campbell 2006:9).

In “Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet,” Dawson and Cowan (2004) point to six aspects of religion online that would need more specific research attention, and among them, he points to those that are using the Internet for religious purposes regarding their motives, practices, and experiences on doing religion online. This study is a case study, but not as a longitudinal study as proposed by Dawson and Cowan. At the same time, it is a study that looks into the practice of religion online on how Christians aid their faith in forum groups (p. 6).

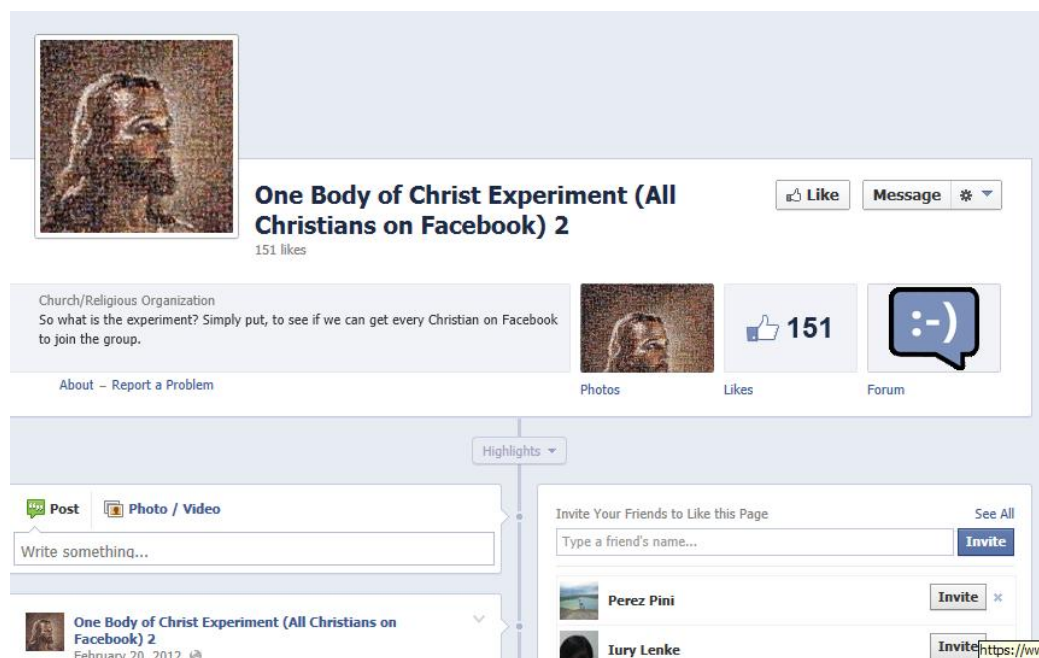
Social Media and Religion Online

Social media has changed the way people communicate and relate to each other, in an unprecedented speed and form, by instantly connecting people from all over the world, and also establishing new religious practices. The most popular social network on the Internet today is Facebook, created in 2004 by sophomore Mark Zuckerberg, a computer savvy at Harvard University. As of March 2013, the company had 4,900 employees, with more than 1.11 billion monthly active users, and 655 million daily active users on average. Approximately 79% of monthly active users are

from outside the U.S. and Canada ([http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid= 25394770723#/press/info.php?statistics](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=25394770723#/press/info.php?statistics)).

In religious activities on Facebook, one of the most popular Christian groups has been *The One Body of Christ Experiment (All Christians on Facebook)*. The group was started in March 2008 by Andrew Sears, a MIT graduate, with a small group of five friends from the United States, Canada, Japan, and Yemen. In six months the group had over 300,000 members, and in March 2009, over 800,000, with over 5,000 topics being discussed in sub-groups. In May 2009, the group reached 1,310,000 members.

Figure 1: One Body of Christ Experiment (All Christians on Facebook) 2.



The purpose of the group was to have Christians from all over the world on Facebook joining the discussion group. The Wall/Info page states that:

All people are welcome including non-Christians but be aware that this is a Christian forum, for Christians and run by Christians. Christians please remember that you are supposed to be the gracious hosts and non-Christians please remember that you are supposed to be the gracious guests. In posting the discussions, please follow Ephesians 4:29: 'Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/One-Body-of-Christ-Experiment-All-Christians-on-Facebook>).

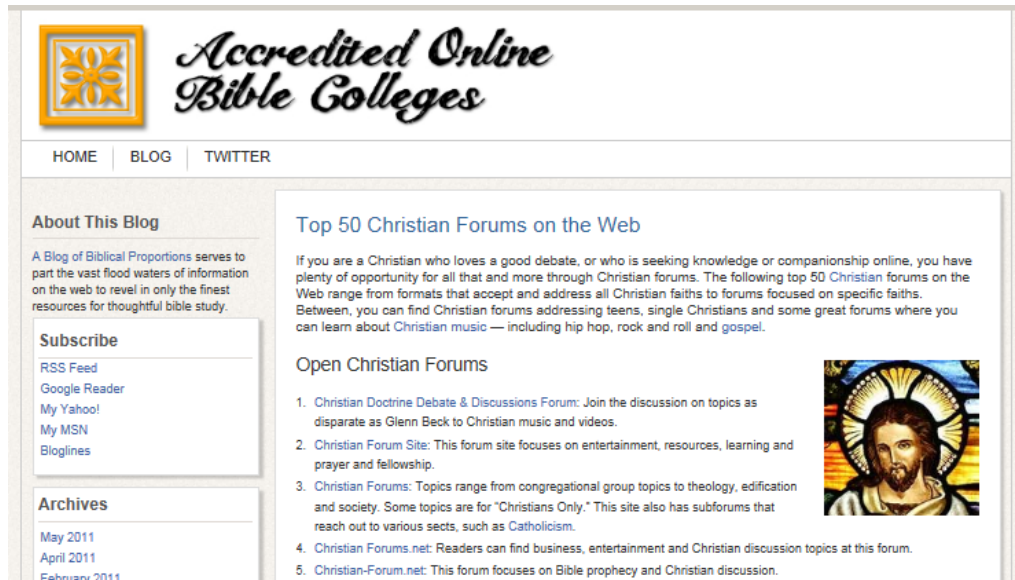
In 2010 Facebook changed the structure of the group discussions into forums on its site, under a new format, archiving all the group discussion content, and redesigning a new format for the groups, whose members needed to move into that new format of groups. The change was implemented in 2011, that the "The One Body of Christ Experiment (All Christians on Facebook)" group continued as "The One Body of Christ Experiment (All *Christians on Facebook 2*)" group, but with a much smaller number of participants and forums. According to Facebook, over 43 million users connect with one or more religious pages. There are 31% of its users in the United States, and 24% from outside the country, who list a religion on their profile. It shows the interest of people using social media, besides their social connections and relationships, extending to spiritual religious practices.

Christian Forums Online Internet.

There are many online Christian forums on the Internet. The top 50 of them are listed at the Accredited Online Bible Colleges website <http://accreditedonlinebible>

colleges.org/2010/top-50-christian-forums-on-the-web/).

Figure 2: Accredited Online Bible College Homepage.

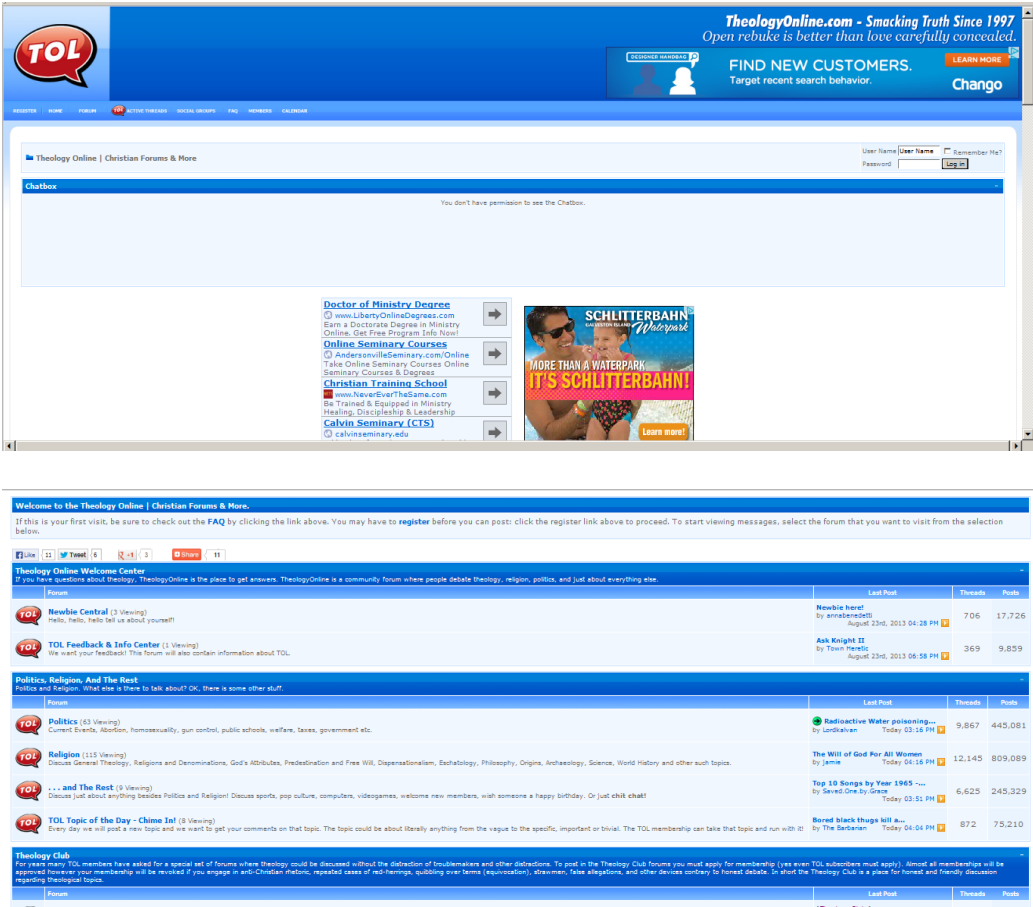


There were chosen to be described succinctly three Christian forum sites: Worthy Christian Forums (<http://www.worthychristianforums.com/>), Theology Online (<http://www.theologyonline.com/forums/forumdisplay.php?f=5>), and Lampstand Christian Forum Community (<http://www.lampstandstudy.com/forum/forum.php>).

Worthy Christian Forums is part of the Worthy Network, a Christian organization based in Israel with a global outreach to more than 120 countries on a daily basis. The organization was founded by George Whitten, in 2000. As of July 2013, Worthy Christian Forums had over 63,000 members, with over 1,585,000 posts (<http://www.worthychristianforums.com/>).

The online Christian forum Theology Online (TOL) is another example of Christian forums. As of July 2013, TOL had 15,105 members with a total of 1,786,046 posts. The opening page states that any topic can be discussed and that members are free to discuss politics and religion because this website likes a spirited debate. They also keep track of the most active poster on the site, which on July 2013 was the member “godruzl” who had over 36,000 posts.

Figure 3: Theology Online Homepage.

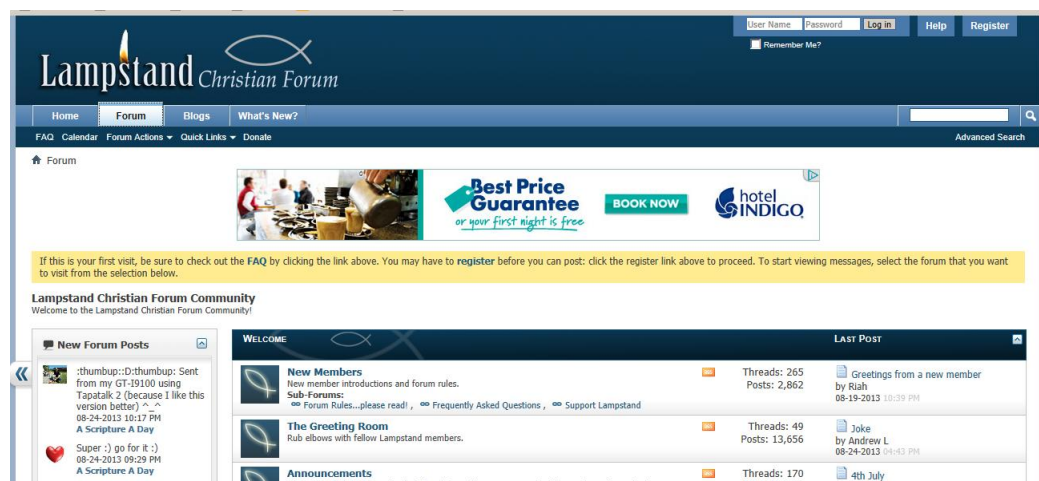


This online forum also recognize its members' birthdays, host a number of different discussions and have a variety of social groups based on different interests. TOL at the same time accepts members of different non-Christian affiliations such as Buddhists, Jewish, Atheists, Muslims and Agnostics. Besides being a forum site, it offers a variety of Biblical spiritual content materials online.

TOL could be described as a melting pot of religions, as well as non-Christian believers, that thrive on the differences between individuals and their faith (or lack of faith), which is the key component that brings its members together.

The Lampstand Christian Forum Community is a smaller and little more conservative than Theology Online and similar in comparison to the Worthy Christian Forums on its structure and content. It is a much smaller online Christian forum with over 1,000 members and over 138,000 posts, as July 2013.

Figure 4: Lampstand Christian Forum Homepage.



The Lampstand Christian Forum also includes threads of conversations or posts regarding specific topics such as the Mayan calendar, sports related topics linked with Christianity (i.e.: Tim Tebow and the Denver Broncos regarding a man's faith), and the Gospel of John's study. The forum requires registering to become a member in order to gain full access to the entire website and to be able to post.

By registering or becoming a member of this online forum, the person also gains access to the members' list and all posts, including the archives. Members can comment on other posts or take part in certain topics of discussion within the forum, as well as can create posts or discussions of their own, like it works on other forums.

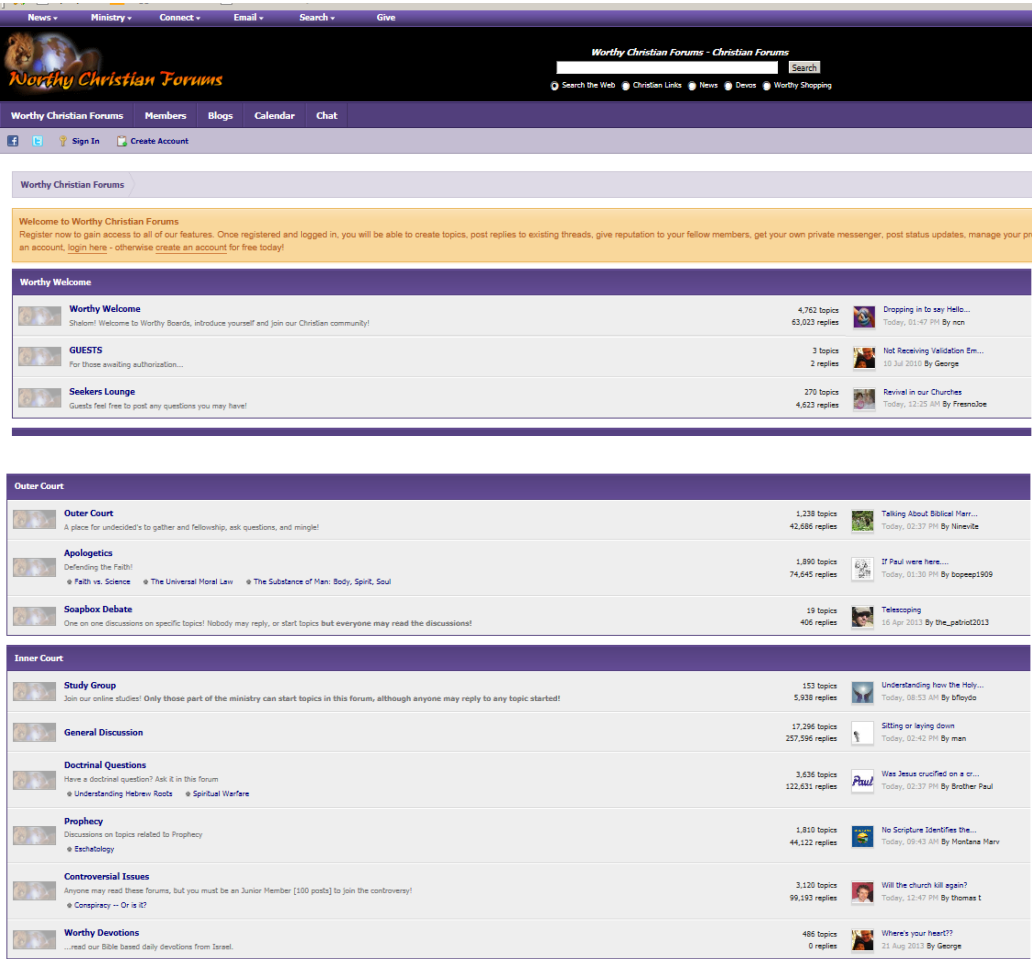
In general, the way everyone contributes actively is by commenting or by taking part in different discussions that are posted, and becoming familiar with the other members of these online Christian forums. Also, with the Lampstand's website and the Worthy Christian Forums, members are encouraged to join a group of interest, while involvement in discussion is rewarded by status. The number of posts that members makes or how active they are is tallied on the Worthy Christian Forum. The more posts that are made, the higher the level or status they reach within the forum.

Worthy Christian Forums

For this case study, I selected a group of active members from the Worthy Christian Forums website, so the site will be described in some more details, although the site itself is not directly part of the research, but the "home" of those

who participate in it. The site is identified as a Christian ministry and is maintained by donations and advertising. There is no advertising on the forum pages, but on a variety of links of the site. On the link of *News* there is a specific link to *Worthy Advertising - Your Christian Advertising Agency* stating that Worthy Network Is becoming one of the leading online Christian ministries on the internet, with over 1,000,000 unique visitors and nearly 3,500,000 page views being displayed a month, as of August 2013.

Figure 5: Worthy Christian Forums Homepage.



Worthy Christian Forums is clearly designed to be a place where Christians interact, in a variety of forums, about their faith and all kinds of personal interests in a variety of topics. As it states on a Term of Services, “Worthy Boards are non-denominational Christian forums where we discuss a host of worthy topics such as Bible prophecy, theology and the latest news. Our desire is to provide a Christian-friendly, family oriented atmosphere online.” The structure of the site is design and divided into different categories, for different topics and even a differentiate access to some of the forums.

There is detailed information about the access to the site and its function. WCF has a statement of faith that expresses the basic Christian beliefs, and some specific doctrines, like about the 66 books of the Bible being “the exhaustive, inerrant and inspired word of God.”

There are two main sections on Worthy Boards, the Inner Court and the Outer Court. The Inner court is designed “for fellowship and discussion among those who know Jesus Christ as Savior.” The Outer Court is described as “a place for undecideds to gather and fellowship, ask questions, and mingle... for those who do not know God to have a better understanding why we believe in God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Bible.”

At the Worthy Christian Forums, there is a variety of ways that Christians from all over the world, from different ages and backgrounds, can stay connected through

their Christian faith. Its members show how their sense of community and connection are shaped by online discussions on a multitude of levels. The participants of that website are ranked at a status or a level of seniority depending on how active they are in the forum as a whole. The more responsive they are, the higher their seniority is in ranks of Member, Senior, Watchman, Royal, etc.

Worthy Christian Forums' members are given ample opportunity to participate or initiate discussion in a variety of areas, such as the online chats that are topic specific, blogs, a number of different forums that include the current news, prayers and praises, and special interests, to name a few. The members become familiar with each other through their posts and participation.

The content discussed in the forums range from religion to current events, from home-making to prayer. The members can ask questions that might be posted by another church member or even a pastor and then these questions are shared on the website as a topic of discussion in one of the forums, allowing a variety of the members to respond and share. The participants of the forums drive heated discussions and opinions on an array of topics that come up in everyday life that Christians question and struggle with. They are further connected in the awareness of each other's trials and celebrations by sharing prayers and praises.

Under special interests, there is a way to share personal interests such as cooking, homeschooling, hobbies, and even finance. There is discussion of current

events and news headlines, very real life, close to home topics that are discussed and prayed about similarly in a traditional church setting. Not only is religion strengthened on these online Christian forums for many of its members, but bonds and long-lasting friendships are formed by the time each person invests on the site, as together they are creating an online community of faith.

The main reason why Worthy Christian Forums was selected for this case study was due to the structure of the site, with specific and distinctive forums related to the Christian faith and life, where participants were really engaged in their spiritual/faith practices. Besides that, the aspect of integrity and reputation of the site was considered a plus for its ability to represent the range of sites. It is also one of the largest, most widely used of all Christian forums, which makes it one of the most significant to analyze.

Purpose of the Case Study

The purpose of this case study is to understand how participants in religious discussion forums benefit from their spiritual activities on the Internet, and in this case, specifically in Worthy Christian Forums. In a growing religious activity on the internet, the relation and the impact of new technologies on the user's spiritual/religious lives was examined. By identifying the participants of the research as professing the Christian faith, the study considers their spiritual background and church experiences when analyzing their use of the Internet for spiritual/religious

purposes, and how their online religious practices affects or aids their faith or spiritual well being.

Outline of the Dissertation

The present case study is divided into five chapters. This first chapter shows an introduction on religious practices online, connected with the social media. Another section is dedicated to online Christian forum sites on the Internet and it sums up with the purpose of this case study.

A literature review is presented in the second chapter, preceded by an approach to a summary of a historic relationship and development of the Christian church and its relation to communication, especially from the printing era to nowadays' new electronic technologies. A special section of this chapter refers to the concept of interactivity, which relates to the different ways or levels of interactions between participants of discussion forums, in a non face-to-face communication in an electronic and virtual communication and relationship.

Chapter three describes the qualitative method applied in the study, whit in-depth questions by e-mail, and the key research questions about the use of the internet for spiritual/religious purposes, and how the online religious practices aids faith or spiritual well being of the participants.

Chapters four and five comprise the core of this case study. In Chapter four there is a data analysis on each of the seven participants in this study, and in chapter five, the discussion of the key research questions and the findings.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Church and Communication: From Printing to New Technologies

Communication has played an important role, particularly in the history of the Christian Church. From its architecture with towers and bells, its liturgical symbols, and especially the printed word to the electronic revolution, the church has been integrating the media into its life and purpose in carrying out its message. Even before the printing press, papyrus was used and kept in the monasteries' libraries.

A strong use of communication by the Christian church was in printing. From theological books to the hymnals and liturgical materials, the printing era has been an important part of the relation between communication and the Christian church. Most of the traditional historic churches had their own publishing company, and some still have them.

There is an ancient relationship between religion, particularly the Christian church and the media, not to mention the arts and music. The revolution in the printing profoundly and significantly impacted the Christian Church in the 15th and 16th centuries, especially. It was not a coincidence that the first book printed by Gutenberg's revolutionary mobile type invention was the Bible, in 1454 or 1455. One of the five original copies of that Bible in the United States, is in permanent exhibition at the Harry Ransom Center Gallery, at The University of Texas (www.hrc.utexas.edu/

exhibitions/permanent/gutenbergbible/). On the same way, the impact of the Reformation movement in reaching the masses was strongly related to the new printing technology, by spreading Martin Luther's 95 Theses and his and others writings, as well as the Catholic counter-reformation actions. After centuries of the printing era, and with the advent of electronic communication, Christian churches incorporated the use of mass media through radio and television, especially, in their mission strategies.

In a comprehensive book about religion and the mass media, Daniel Stout and Judith Buddenbaum (1996) selected a variety of texts with an academic approach to the study of religion and media, and especially focused on religious institutions and audiences, since that focus has been prominent in the field of mass media research. Religion, and particularly Christianity, has played an important role throughout the history of mass media in the United States by being integrated into the development of the media and its content. It began with the strong presence of religions in the secular print world and in their own printing presses, in newspapers, magazines, and books.

On the aspect of public relations and an early concern by the churches to appear in the mass media, John Ferré (2000) writes about the Protestant press relations between 1930 and 1970, describing how in 1929 religious organizations organized, a "Religious Publicity Council." The main goals were to "get newspapers to get the church angle... to recognize the great field there is for news in church life...to

keep informed as to what our own organizations are doing...to (develop and share) methods of getting news before the public through the newspapers, and (to understand) the value of newspaper publicity and newspaper advertising” (p. 261). That was an official step by religious organizations in facing and looking for a space in the media, using new communication tools for their religious purposes. In his doctoral dissertation on “Speaking of Faith: Public Relations Practices Among Religion Communicators in the United States,” Douglas Cannon (2008), looked into a current Public Relations practices by Christian communicators representing their church bodies.

What started with the printing press soon went to radio and television. Religion organizations and particularly Christian churches have followed the development of the field of communication, and soon adopted new technologies, like the mass media, to express their beliefs and get new believers and members. The advent of radio very soon became part of religious experiences.

The presence of religion on radio has been very strong in the United States since the 1920s, and its model was exported much to the rest of the world. Most of the traditional churches still have a “radio ministry”. To mention an example among many, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod owns KFJO AM radio station since 1924, in Saint Louis, MO, a project of a Seminary Professor, Walter A. Mayer. KFJO, with the

original meaning given as “Keep Forward, Upward, Onward”, became the first religious radio station in the United States (Fore, 1987:77).

A church lay organization founded in 1917, by a small group of laymen called *The Lutheran Laymen’s League*, inspired and led by professor, Dr. Walter A. Mayer, launched a radio program, in 1930, called *The Lutheran Hour*. As the speaker of the program, he became nationally known and led mission rallies by gathering thousands throughout the country. “The Lutheran Hour” became a mission organization, today identified as Lutheran Hour Ministries.

After Mayer, one of the most influential speakers of the program was Dr. Oswald Hoffman, who expanded the impact of the Lutheran Hour ministry on radio, beyond the U.S., to the five continents. Today, *The Lutheran Hour Ministries* “produces Christian radio and TV programming for broadcast, as well as internet and print communications, dramas, music, and outreach materials to reach the unchurched in more than 30 countries. LHM's flagship program, ‘The Lutheran Hour’, is the world's longest-running Christian outreach radio program, and it airs weekly on more than 1,400 stations” (www.lhm.org). Stewart Hoover (1998), in *Mass Media Religion* notes that “the first television program produced by a major denomination was the venerable *This Is the Life*, produced by the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church out of broadcasting funds raised for their successful radio program *The Lutheran Hour*” (p.52)

Another example of the use of radio by Christian organizations, which later went to television, is the *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association*. As a Southern Baptist minister, he “rose to celebrity status in 1949 with the national media backing of William Randolph Hearst and Henry Luce. His sermons were broadcast on radio and television, some still being re-broadcast today. Graham is notable for having been a spiritual adviser to several United States Presidents; he was particularly close to Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard M. Nixon. During the civil rights movement, he began to support integrated seating for his revivals and crusades; in 1957 he invited the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to preach jointly at a revival in New York City, where they appeared together at Madison Square Garden... Graham operates a variety of media and publishing outlets. According to his staff, more than 3.2 million people have responded to the invitation at Billy Graham Crusades to accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior.

As of 2008, Graham's estimated lifetime audience, including radio and television broadcasts, topped 2.2 billion”. According to the 2011 Annual Report of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, its budget was over 260 million dollars, being the income 88% from contributions (<http://www.billygraham.org/annualreports.asp>).

From radio to television it became just one step for religion organizations to move to the new medium. The late 1970s and the 1980s was the era of the American “televangelists,” when the concept of the “electronic church” was coined. Based on

charismatic personalities and professionally produced television religious “shows,” Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, Rex Humbard, Pat Robertson, Jim and Tammy Baker (to mention the most popular) were the leaders of audiences of the electronic church in the U.S., and throughout the world. According to Quentin Schultze (1987), “the so-called electronic church has created a special class of prophetic clergy who sometimes claim special knowledge and spiritual insight into the power of modern communications technologies” (p.253).

Economic and political influences as well as power were present in those big “religious enterprises.” Moral and financial misconduct scandals by some of the televangelist icons, coincidentally or not, marked a declining time of the *electronic church* era. The electronic church was not part of a church body, but was developed by individuals who became “stars” of multitudes using the power of mass media.

In the United States the *electronic church* had its biggest audience impact on traditional church members. Despite the popularity of the electronic church and its impact, a relatively small percentage of the American population in general, supported financially the televangelists’ programs. Around 13.3 million viewers (5% of the population) regularly watched religious programs, including different kinds of traditional conservative programs (Gerbner et al., 1984). William Fore, former president of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), in his book

“Television and Religion: the Shaping of Faith, Values, and Culture,” states a critical view on the electronic church:

The electronic church is a great show business, a terrific audience grabber, and very much in tune with the times. But its popularity is more a sign that has become just a part of TV’s entertainment package with a religious gloss than it is the good news of the Christian faith (1987: 113).

The use of mass media, particularly television, has not brought more people to the churches, but has actually divided member’s attention, participation, and financial support with the “electronic church” (Stout & Buddenbaum, 1996). So the use of traditional communication technologies has apparently not increased membership or participation in churches.

Since the Christian church historically has been more focused on the content than on the communication process, media communication has been seen as a transportation model, and there is a new reality with the new technologies challenging religion, and particularly challenging the churches in their communication process and interactions among its members. A new approach on the use of communication by the Christian churches is suggested by Hoover on “Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture” to “see communication arising out of the interaction between texts, producers, receivers, and the contexts wherein they reside” (Hoover, 1997:4).

A different view of the communication process sees communication as the production and exchange of meanings, or the interaction of messages and texts with people that produces meanings. Schramm (1964:13) defines the basics on the relation between source and audience applied to the mass media, which can also be considered for the new media. He mentions as important elements in this process the design and delivery of the message in order to gain attention of the audience, the signs that refer to common experiences of the sender and receiver in order to get meaning across, and the need of the message related to personality needs and a desired response. The theories about the effects of the mass media on society can also be applied in this study to the analysis of the new media use and its impact on religion practices.

Communication have been seen and used mainly in the Christian church as a “transmission process” of messages. From Aristotle’s conception about the source, the channel and the receiver, through the printing revolution era inaugurated by Gutenberg, to the electronic digital age, communication has basically been used and understood as a transmission process by and within the Christian church.

The traditional approaches to media and religion have been instrumentally oriented, or based on what James Carey (1989) calls as “transportation model of communication,” where communication is seen as cause and consequence of known autonomous and independent actors and receivers. The basic first model of the

source, channel, and audience can be identified on the transportation model, where the spiritual leaders saw the media as just channels of communication to convey their messages to an audience.

In *Christian Communication Reconsidered* John Bluck (1989), approaches a 'theology of communication,' suggesting five basic aspects or concepts to be considered, such as dialogue, content, intention, form, and outcome. By considering dialogue, he states that, "the focus is on communication between people built through conversation that builds relationships. So the degree of participation, quality of listening, appropriateness of speaking are still important, within and between individuals, groups and cultures" (p. 69).

The content of the message is crucial and vital for religion. It relates to the basis where each religion stands on its beliefs or doctrines. Traditionally in the Christian churches, it has been more important *what* is said than *how* it is said. Such an approach prioritizes the content within the communication process. The *intention* is related to the motivation of the acts and words of the speaker (preacher) and becomes a test of communication credibility. The *form* "looks to the shape and appearance, the unity and rhythm of communication for a clue about its *Christianess*. In doing so, it gives artistic insight, theological status, trusting that the painter's line, the musician's sound, and writer's image can be divinely revealing" (p. 72). And finally

by *outcome*, Bluck asks for the difference that Christian communication does (or supposedly does), and what results it produces.

According to Hoover (1997), "the boundaries between the religious and the media are disappearing. It is no longer relevant to think about religious institutions producing messages to influence a separate secular realm. In the media age, the secular is sacred and the sacred is secular" (p 68). With the development and adoption of new technologies, the Internet is becoming an integral part of different religion experiences and their communication strategies and processes.

The development of a virtual reality is an important part for the analysis of how new technologies are used and are affecting religious experiences today, particularly by the internet. In his article "Ekphrasis, Virtual Reality, and the Future of Writing," Jay Bolter and Brusin (1999) in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, look into the relationship between word and image, the breakout of the visual, the text as a window (looking at or looking through the text), and virtual reality as another technology for looking through. They discuss the issue of replacement of verbal text and print (written text) by multimedia (as an iconic shift): "In current multimedia...the trend is not to integrate the textual and the perceptual. Instead, perceptual presentation is being used to displace or replace verbal text. Video and animation dominate the screen; while verbal text is marginalized...something similar is happening in print. In fact, print and electronic technology seem to be moving along parallel lines as our culture revises

its sense apparent in American newspapers and magazines, particularly ones associated with the new media" (p. 257). Their conclusive point is that the electronic technology is developing and increasing dependence upon and interest in the visual on the present relationship between the use of word and image by the new technologies, and that is not reflective of a peaceful coexistence.

Another important factor to consider is the human relationships and their psychological uses of the new media. Teske (2002) identifies it as *interconnectedness*. He deals with the link between human meaning and technological culture, pointing out the importance of its impact on the human senses, ethics, and spirituality. For Jaron Lanier, a recognized "father" of virtual reality, "the digital superhighway is much more than a highway system. It is actually the construction of an entirely new virtual continent in which the highway runs. In the future, we will live part of our lives in cyberspace, in the world of virtual reality" (Tynman, 1994).

New Technologies and Religion Online

The rapid technological changes and the mergers in the communication industry field are shaping and defining the new technologies. For John Pavlick (1996) "these new technologies are dramatically transforming almost every aspect of how we communicate and with whom, as well as just about any other dimension of our lives" (p.1), and Christians (2002) adds that "the technological order is so pervasive, so overwhelming in its ubiquity, we can contain it no longer" (p.42).

While there is a concern on how the technological changes are affecting the nature of the communication content, the media audience, the media professional environment, and the communication field in general, it is also important for the churches to find out how it is affecting the spiritual or religious experience of its users.

Probably never in its history has the Christian church, and certainly religion in general, been so impacted and challenged by communication technologies as it is today. "The new electronic media can be viewed initially as an addition to the existing spectrum rather than as a replacement. On the other hand, we have to consider that digitalization and convergence might have much more revolutionary consequences" (McQuail, 2000:118).

There are new paradigms in the information society as a result of the impact of the new communication technologies, which are affecting and challenging the churches today, especially by the use and pervasive presence of the Internet in people's lives. The Internet, as the most clearly expression of the new technologies, is invading people's lives and affecting their personal, family and friends relationships, as well as their religious practices.

What is new at this time is the way in which new technologies are beginning to be used by churches, not only as means of a content transmission, but as part of the relationship between the user and the medium, where the content of the message may be also affected by the use of the medium. McLuhan's (1964) theory about that

relationship or even the integration of the medium and the message can be revisited here, where “the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance “(p. 18). His concept of "the medium is the message" applies not only to the relationship of the message content and the medium, but also to the relationship of the medium’s user.

Religion and more specifically the Christian churches are looking into an approach and use of the new media in a so called postmodern society, which relates to a variety of fields like philosophy, art, literature, and others, which is impacting religion, while “postmodernism relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one's own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal” (www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/postm-body.html). Beliefs are being questioned and not anymore accepted as a truth established by a church doctrinal concept, rather than defined by a personal view.

This are challenging times for Christian churches as institutions in order to find their way of mediating their messages and keeping their doctrinal principles in this era of new technologies. As Biernatzki (2006) alerts us, “the Internet as an unrestricted field for self-expression offers a tempting resource for people who want to “do their own thing” in religion. At the same time, some may be attracted by the Internet’s

anonymity, giving them opportunities to explore the esoteric without risking peer criticism” (p. 19).

Heidi Campbell (in Mitchel & Marriage, 2003) writes about her research on religion and cyberculture in *Approaches to Religious Research in Computer-Mediated Communication*, considering the new media a new fascinating area of study created by the Internet. The process of human communication via computers “is a process of capturing, storing, reproducing, delivering computer-mediated coded messages, and the effect this process has on senders, receivers and social structures” (p. 217).

Religion in general, and the Christian churches in particular, are being challenged by new communication technologies, and adopting them as part of their ministries, on communicating with their members and publics through their websites, Facebook, twitter, and other platforms. “Internet communication is easy and effortless, ubiquitous, converging, and viral, and it also connects people – contrary to previous communication’s ‘one-way’ tools” (Gelfgren, 2012:235).

In a time of social media, the Internet is creating social groups or online communities, where people are finding relationships and connections that are not being experienced in their churches. A concept of online community is being formed and also questioned by a traditional church concept of community.

Identifying desired relational qualities found in online community, such as emotional intimacy, trust, honesty, and openness, provides a general critique and redefining of the concept of community. When the Internet produces

relationships described as more intimate than those in the church, the question must be asked: Could online community become a substitute for offline community (Campbell, 2005:170)?

On considering religion and new technologies, and specifically related to the internet, Hackett (2006) states that

e need to recognize the ambiguous, fluid, almost volatile, nature of the internet, as well as its composite character. The combination of static and moving images and text, as well as aural and tactile forms of communication, lends it an aura of mystery. The endless possibilities of interactivity and connectivity are both awesome and empowering (p. 68),

which points to an important aspect of religion online, considering the importance of interaction and connectivity, as elements of religious practices.

Interactivity and Religion Online

In the first decade of this new century, with the advance of the new technologies, interactivity became important as an element of research, and at the same time a challenging concept due to the diversity of circumstances and situations where interactivity is present in media communication events, which includes religion/faith practices online.

When facing the new media from his theoretical perspective among other elements, McQuail (2000) wonders about the new media saying that, “they could easily have a distinct social and cultural effect... something still not properly assessed. There are several gaps and deficiencies in the theoretical apparatus at our disposal and

there is some risk in placing new developments too quickly within old frames” (481). By listing some of the new media characteristics related to an information society like social network, and freedom of expression, he raises a concern about interactivity and social relationships.

The identification and definition of interactivity has been present in the studies of communication for a long time, from the face-to-face or interpersonal communication theories developed mostly in the 1960s through the 1980s (Griffin, 1997) and to the present time of the new communication technologies, when the concept and definition of interactivity has been challenged without having reached an agreement on a common definition.

Severin & Tankard (2001) identified a problem on defining interactivity because of its use in two different senses. “People with backgrounds in computer science tend to think interactivity refers to the user interacting with the computer... (while) communication scholars tend to think of interactivity involving communication between two human beings” (p. 370). So interactivity arises as an important and undefined element on the use of new technologies at the very beginning of its arrival on the communication research field, at the beginning of this 21st century.

At the genesis of conceptualizing interactivity, Rafaeli (1988) considered the study of interactivity as “part of the evolution in the ontology and epistemology of new communication technologies in general, and computers as media in particular,”

and he saw it being “characterized as movement along three axes: (a) scope of interest typifying research, (b) the ‘user’ or communication-process-participant upon whom research focuses, and (c) the disciplinary location of the phenomenon studied” (p.112). This relates to the importance of new communication technologies in social relations, and shows a new field for academic research.

In his view on new communication technologies trends, Rafaeli perceives a move from the traditional Shannon & Weaver model of communication to a concept that emphasizes feedback in a new approach where there is an instant interaction between sender and receiver mediated by new technologies. It’s not an interaction based on characteristics of the medium, but based on a process where interaction happens as mediated by new technology.

Using a qualitative method approach, Downes & McMillan (2000) consider three message-based dimensions and three participant-based dimensions to define interactivity. Under message-based dimensions they found out that interactivity increases as two-way communication enables all participants to actively communicate, as timing of communication is flexible to meet the time demands of participant, and as the communication environment creates a sense of place.

By considering the participant-based dimensions, the research suggests that interactivity increases as participants perceive that they have more control of the communication environment, as they find the communication to be responsive, and as

individuals perceive that the goal of communication is more oriented to exchanging information than to attempting to persuade (pp.106-107). It makes the participants active actors in the process of communication and not part of a passive audience. The new media technology is enabling a personal interaction and control of participants in the whole communication process, now more intensive with the development of the social networks.

Interactivity seen under a message-based dimensions perspective works as participants of the process perceive direction of communication, time flexibility, and sense of place dimensions. When seen under participant-based dimensions, interactivity works as participants perceive level of control, responsiveness, and purpose of the communication event. When considering the “message-based dimension” and the “participant-based dimension” in the discussion and definition of interactivity, there are important elements that are present in any human interactive process a sense of feelings, which point to social and psychological elements present in the communication act.

Since interactivity suggests a sequence of actions and reactions, the sense of feelings in those actions and reactions becomes an important aspect or element of the interactive event, connected to the different dimensions suggested by Downes & McMillan on their study by defining interactivity.

In the study “Interactivity, Information Processing, and Learning on the World Wide Web,” Tremayne & Dunwoody (2001) suggest a model of interacting information process. Among different approaches found in the literature for the question on where interactivity resides, it revealed the complexity of the concept applied to the media. Their research showed that most of the studies have focused on an implicit conceptualization of interactivity by looking into the end of the communication process than to an explicit conceptualization of interactivity that looks to the process itself.

On asking where does interactivity reside, studies show that the approaches to interactivity could be grouped in three categories, as McMillan (1999) suggested. One focus has been on the individual and his or her behavior on the interactive action using new technologies. A second common approach focuses on characteristics of communication channels used on the interactive process; and a third approach is that suggested by Rafaeli where interactivity is not considered a characteristic of the medium, changing a structuralistic approach commonly used. From the traditional concept of a two-way communication, where communicators are involved intentionally as senders and receivers, there is a new situation where the “activeness” of one of the participants involved in the process of communication between a person and the computer (website) may be questioned.

Considering that the concept of interactivity defined by Tremayne & Dunwood claims an intentional sender and receiver involved - “at least two communicators must be involved” (p.114), there is a difference between the action of sending and receiving of a person and the computer/website (webmaster) “reaction” to that act. While a website is static (although it may be updated periodically), the action of the human subject in the process is dynamic. So when the web “intentionally” sends its message to the “human subject reader” the one-way communication is accomplished, but when the human subject reacts to that message, the web cannot engage in the “conversation” or in continuous interactivity.

There is actually an interactivity going on between the searcher and the web in this kind of communication, but there still can be a question on the intentionality of the website as one of the participants in the process between a human and technology interaction. So it’s important to consider the human-to-human relation/interaction and the human-machine/technology relation/interaction on defining interactivity, as a “synergy between sender and receiver” (p. 111).

A comprehensive study to define interactivity within the research field of the new technologies was done by Spiro Kiousis (2002). In his study “Interactivity: A Concept Explication.” He follows eight steps by working on a comprehensive concept of interactivity, considering previous and different approaches and definitions given to the concept in the previous literature review.

With a purpose of defining an inclusive definition of interactivity, Kiousis states that “interactivity can be defined as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many), both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency). Regarding human users, the definition refers to their ability to perceive the experience as a simulation of interpersonal communication and increases their awareness of telepresence” (p.372). He adds to the definition of interactivity an interesting concept of “mediate environment,” created by new communication technologies and related to a reciprocal exchange of messages and actions defined as synchronous and asynchronous movements.

As the operational definition, Kousis suggests that are three main aspects or major dimensions to be considered, which are the structure of technology, the communication context, and the user’s perception. The three dimensions are equally important for interactivity. The structure of technology considers the medium and its presence and influence on the interactive process on a scale of speed, range, timing flexibility, and sensory complexity, which can be used to estimate the levels of technological interactivity. The second major dimension to be considered is the communication context, which can be measured on a scale of third-order dependency and social presence as elements that are related to characteristics of the

communication setting. And the third major dimension is the user's perception, which can be measured on a scale of proximity, sensory activation, and telepresence, which are related to the interpersonal communication dimensions of interactivity.

Kousis' operational definition of interactivity "not only describes the essence of theoretical definition of interactivity, but may also help broaden the concept's boundaries... permitting analysis across media and individuals. Interactivity is understood as both a media and psychological variable" (p.378). In a study on online ritual practices, Helland (2012) refers to ritual engagement saying that:

The person visiting the website has more than just a virtual connection; they are participating in a form of "long-distanced" ritual practice that is facilitated by the Internet. They have connected with the sacred site conducted a ritual (this case a prayer request), and left tangible prove of their visit... In some cases the computer becomes part of the sacred space, and in other situations it acts as a portal, conduit or tool to connect with the sacred (pp. 33, 36).

This case study doesn't look into rituals online, but what Helland refers to virtual connection, can be applied to the concept of interactivity in discussion.

What is particularly useful for the online religion studies and analysis is Kousis' view of "mediated environment" created by new communication technologies and related to a reciprocal exchange of messages and actions defined as synchronous and asynchronous movements. The human element considered in his definition, where the ability of perceiving the experience is part of the process, is very important for the purpose of analyzing the search for spiritual aid through the use of new technologies.

The concept of interactivity becomes an important component of the computer-mediated religious communication process. Religious practices have different expressions and dimensions, and interactivity is a vital element present in most of those practices, especially in online interactions.

There are contradictory signs in a society still characterized as mass and changing into a cyber society, where individuals are connected more by technologies than by personal, human face-to-face relations. Mediated communication made us all to be closer, instantly connected no matter what geographic distance, and at the same time more apart and isolated from each other. There is an important role for the new technologies by establishing live interactive communication, which also applies to people's religious experiences.

In "Personal Connections in the Digital Age," scholar Nancy Bayam notes that "new technologies offer many affordances that influence what happens through and because of them. The combination of interactivity and reach allows people to come together around shared interests, transcending local communities" (2010:97), which not only applies to social interactions, but also to personal religious interactions.

Christian Faith Practices Online

In their 2001 *CyberChurch Report* on 11 net-based faith activities, the Barna Group found that online worship was among the least appealing options for religious online experiences compared to reading and listening to devotional messages, buying

religious products, etc. But based on their assessment, they predicted that by 2011, over 50 million Americans would seek spiritual experiences solely through the internet, rather than in churches, and that 100 million Americans would use the internet for some aspects of religious experience.

While there is a growing number of Christian church members practicing their faith on the Internet, there is a general trend showing that in the last decades attendance is declining across almost all historic church denominations, with some exceptions related to charismatic leaders or specific groups which is clearly indicated.

In *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network*, Heidi Campbell (2005) makes an extensive and updated overview on Christian religious communities using the Internet for online faith practices. She sees the Internet as more than a network tool, and becoming a social network facilitating new forms of spiritual and social interaction. Her study shows that the Internet is not replacing the church community, but it's becoming another tool to connect people in another sphere. "Internet use is not causing people to leave their local churches or to shy away from face-to-face community participation. The majority of community members described their online involvement as 'supplement' rather than a substitute for local church involvement" (p. 189).

The field of online religion is very dynamic, as social changes occur, especially with the impact of new communication technologies in a digital age. Studies of religion

online are beginning to address “how practices and interactions online within a specific community context may point to larger cultural shifts that describe or define our information-based society” (Campbell, 2005:312).

The studies and the concept of online communities have been constantly addressed in studies of online religion, since religious practices are traditionally based in a church which gathers as community. Definitions of online community have been developed.

An online community is a product of an information-driven culture providing a forum to sustain and connect individuals who would otherwise be distanced due to geography, lifestyle, or other limitations. It is a new social grouping, created as people invest emotionally in relationships formed online. The characteristics of online relationships – being self-directed, nonphysical, and allowing anonymity – make online community both unique and complex (Campbell, 2005:50).

In the studies of online religion, the aspect of identity has been frequently addressed from different perspectives. Scholar Mia Lövheim (2012), who has published many studies about it, perceives a shift in the academic studies related to the engagement of people practicing religion online.

The focus on continuity and connections between how individuals express and enact their religious identity in online and offline settings has contributed to a gradual shift from studying peoples’ engagement with religion on the Internet as an activity separated from other arenas of their everyday life (p. 49).

Another topic of attention and focus on religion online is about individual religious concepts developed by those involved in online religious practices, particularly Christian church members. By interacting with a variety of people from different church denominations and doctrinal views, individuals are forming their own view about a set of beliefs. In a case study *“Go Online!’ said my guardian Angel”: The Internet as a platform for religious negotiation*, researcher Nadja Miczek (2012) points that:

Individual religious concepts and interpretations are probably more visible on the Internet than they are in other mass media. Patchwork patterns incorporating, transforming, and recognizing various religious elements within one single biography stand side by side with more “traditional” ways of constructing personal religiosity, which follow the dominant discourse of churches or established religious traditions (p. 219).

Practitioners of religion online are normally traditional church members or ex-members or those who left a Christian church. So they bring to the virtual space of faith practicing their heritage from their former or even present religious experiences. At the same time, the churches are being challenged by the online experiences of their members or by those who left the church. Campbell and Teusner (2011) found that:

Internet culture is challenging traditional Christian structures, especially those that appraise and correct theological knowledge. Just as the words and actions of religious leaders are susceptible to scrutiny by online sources, so the Internet can create spaces for people to re-examine the doctrines, symbols, and practices of religious traditions (p. 65).

The present case study looks into the dynamic and complex field of religion online, seeking for answers to how and in what ways does the Internet affect the participants' religious experiences in online forums.

CHAPTER 3

Method and Study Design

Research Questions

This case study focused on a group of active members practicing religious on Worthy Christian Forums. A qualitative method was applied with interviews through e-mail. A detailed description of the case study and method is found later in this chapter.

The study seeks to answer the following key research questions (RQ):

RQ 1: *How does the Internet affect the participants' religious experiences in online forums?*

RQ 2: *What kinds of content are the participants looking for in the online forums?*

RQ 3: *To what extent is the use of the Internet substituting for traditional church (offline) experience?*

RQ 4: *How are the online forum participants finding community in the virtual space? How does it compare to offline community for them?*

RQ 5: *What is the Internet as a virtual religious experience doing to the concept of place (sanctuary, temple) and church in relation to the person's spiritual/religious experience?*

RQ 6: *How does interactivity affect the online religious practices in the forums?*

From Facebook to Worthy Christian Forums

This project was started on Facebook. After searching its many religious forums, I focused my attention on one of the most active forums at the time, called *One Body of Christ Experiment*, which started in 2008 and in one and a half years had over a million members, posting over 5,000 topics, as described. During a period of two years I followed the posts and selected topics with more specific religious doctrinal and Christian life content. Some of those topics were *Building People Up*, *How do You Know God?*, *Baptism*, *What is the Gospel?*, *The Trinity*, *Salvation*, and others. On those discussions, I was identifying a group of active participants who were posting in different forums, members who appeared very involved with their online Christian faith.

The change in the Facebook forums in 2011 disrupted many of the online communities, and a new group was formed, with the same name, but with the need to start new discussion topics, etc. At that time I was following and observing the discussions on those different topics, and I started to select the most active participants with the highest number of posts on the discussion forums. The change on the Facebook discussion groups also caused me to look into another option for my research project.

Following an overview and observation of different religious discussion sites/forums on the Internet, I chose to focus this study on the *Worthy Christian*

Forums website. The reasons for choosing that site were its structure, its principles, the variety of forums' content and opportunities for people to participate, the dynamic of its function, the significance and seriousness of the site leadership, and the number of posts. As mentioned in Chapter 1, as of June 2013, WCF had over 1,800,000 posts on its forums, with over 63,000 members. Also the Christian content/topics of the forums matched with the purpose of my research study, which drove me to develop the present case study focusing on a group of very active forum members.

After visiting the site and the forums for a couple of months, I joined it as a member without introducing myself or participating on forums with posts, but following the discussions in different forums, for a period of four months. After that, I contacted a site moderator, introducing myself and explaining about my research and my interest on WCF for my case study. There was an initial reluctance from the site leadership to my research project by being focused on its site, because of some problems the site had recently with people that joined it for personal interests in order to cause damage to it, as a moderator wrote. There have been many attacks on the site in the past year. The moderator said that there were members from an atheist website pretending to be seekers or Christians and it was not positive to the site. They even dedicated a special thread on their site posting about how they "fooled and got around our system," said the moderator. "Within the past 9 months or so, we have

stopped 71,539 spam attempts to our site, to date of this writing” (personal communication by e-mail, May 5, 2013).

Following a series of e-mail exchanges with a moderator, and a contact by e-mail with the owner of the site, I got a positive response to my request, and started to interact with forum participants in order to select a group of active members of the site. To get access to exchange personal messages with the forum members, I needed to introduce myself with my username to the CWF on the Worthy Welcome forum, and have 10 posts on it, which I did, and through the site personal message system, I invited them to participate in the study, following the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements, with a specific consent e-mail from them, as well as following the requirements regarding confidentiality and privacy for the participants.

The Case Study

A concept of case study defined by Yin (2014) as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in-depth and within real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and the context may not be clearly evident”(p.9) supports the design of the present study, since the key elements of Yin’s concept or definition are present on the online religious practices topic of the study. He also states that, “as a research method, the case study is used in many situations, to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena” (p. 4). Because the research focused on a

specific group of people practicing their faith on a specific forum website and aiming to find how and why they do it for their spiritual benefit, it also aligns with a principle suggested by Yin (2014), when comparing a case study to other models for research studies, as he states that a case study “would be a preferred method compared with others, when (1) the main research questions are ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions; (2) a researcher has little or no control over behavioral events; and (3) the focus of study is a contemporary (as opposed to entirely historical) phenomenon” (p. 2).

Online religious practice is a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context in this case study, and is applied specifically to a group of Christians. My option for a case study was based on the best way I saw to look deep into a group of very active Christians online practicing their faith on the Internet, most of them having that as their only spiritual/faith practice.

Participants in this case study were arbitrarily chosen from different WCE forums, based on their active participation on the forums and their number of posts. The number of posts of the participants varied from 1,500 to over 30,000 posts, as shown on the site regarding each member. I was not looking or considering casual participants, but those heavily involved with practicing their faith online. I had observed their activity on the forums, where most of the content was related to religious spiritual issues, since the site has many options of content and engagement. My contact with the participants was first through the site’s Personal Messages (PM),

and then for the interviews, by e-mail. I didn't have any other form of contact with the interviewees. Members of the site have a page with personal information, which is accessible to the site members. Information varies from personal interests, hobbies, faith testimonies, home place, and even date of birth. Some share detailed information, others not, especially regarding age.

The approach and analysis of the study was developed in two phases. In the first phase, different forum discussion groups were observed on the "Community" link of the site, which includes a variety of discussion forums. The observation was focused on the content being discussed, and on how frequent and involved the participants were in the discussion in different forums. The most active forum members do not restrict their participation in only one forum group. They are present and active in different groups, according to their interest in particular topics, while their activity can be seen by the number of posts, which the site identifies and shows.

Access to the discussion forums is open without the need of the investigator to join the group. For a period of two months I visited the site as an observer. Then in order to get more access to some restricted links from the site, I joined it as member, but not posting on discussion forums, since my role was not to discuss and/or express my points of view on the issues, but to learn and analyze the participants' involvement and discussions.

Once I got access to the members' Personal Message feature of the site, I started contacting the selected participants for my study. Due to the in-depth interviews chosen for the case study, I looked for a group between 5 and 10 participants. I invited 13 forum members to participate, and 7 responded positively. In the group of participants are five males and two females, and their ages vary from 25 to 70 years old. They are all from the United States, geographically spread across the country. Participants were coded with Greek alphabet letters, starting with the letter Alpha, and following the alphabet sequence up to Eta. So people became cases in a case study.

The significance of this group is reflected in their strong spiritual activity online. For most of them, especially the most active within the group, their online religious practice has "substituted" for their offline church attendance, since most of them left their offline churches some years ago already. Another important aspect about this group for the case study is related to their ages, by being from different age groups, as well as being from different geographic location in the country. Also having males and females in the group enriched the data.

The main limitation of this study is that because of the limited number of participants in the group, we cannot generalize from this study to a large population or consider it a scientific sample of a wider reality of online religious practices. However, the purpose of the study was not intended to generalize but focused on digging as

deep as possible into some compelling, interesting cases of personal online faith practice experiences of individuals heavily involved on “living their Christian faith” online. Instead of generalizing from this group as a sample, we should look at them as intensely involved individuals whose practices may point the way to preliminary, in-depth understanding of some online religious practices that may be developing in the wider society.

Methodology

A qualitative approach is used for this study. A key objective of using a qualitative method, is “to obtain information by exploring, identifying, and examining an issue by questioning, engaging, and/or observing those individuals who are involved with, affected by, and/or familiar with the issue under study” (Moore & Flowers, 2002:a). Looking into the fast pace of changes in society today and how we are affected by those changes, there are some important aspects of the research process that need to be perceived by the researcher.

For Lindlof and Taylor (2010), the field of research is not static and its formation is affected culturally by “transnational ethnic migrations, global flows of image and capital, and the explosive growth of media technologies” that are creating “worlds of competing discourses and multiple, unstable identities” (p.133), and they suggest that the complexity and mobility of the field needs to be considered carefully

by the researcher when contacting or entering the scene of study at the chosen field, which can be applied to the new challenging field of online religion.

On conceptualizing qualitative Internet research, Shani (2009) defines it as a “study of the multiple meanings and experiences that emerge around the internet in a particular context,” which is the context of online religion practices, where he sees the researcher’s task involved in qualitative research to “to inquire into those meanings and experiences and explore their significance” (p. 34). It connects to Yin’s “how” and “why” in a case study. In a comprehensive survey/review about religion online academic research and publication, scholar Heidi Campbell (2005) found different methodologies that have been applied and a variety of themes being researched on online religion studies.

A variety of methodologies have been employed from focused ethnographies of a single community to large-scale surveys of Internet users. In this survey of common themes – theology/spirituality, religion, morality/ethics, practical/ministry applications, religious traditions, community, identity, authority/power, and ritual online – we see a broad base of research that has been gathered, providing grounding for new researches who seek to interpret and contextualize their own studies of religion online (p. 17).

By making a parallel of qualitative Internet research with other areas of social mediated life, Bakardjieva (2009) sees it also as “looking at people, their hustles and bustle, their conversations, and their artifacts and texts produced in and through different media”(p.59). In the present study, it relates to people’s religious practices

online and their interaction on the subject of religious content, looking to aid their spiritual needs.

For this qualitative interview case study, a series of open-ended questions were sent to the participants and answered by them through e-mail. During a period of six weeks, e-mails were frequently exchanged with the participants about their religious online experience on the forums, with the questions being extended deeper into each of the participant's responses (see Appendix 1). I had a series of questions prepared, and they were sent to the participants in groups of 3-5 questions in each e-mail. Following the responses to the questions, I developed more questions related to the content of the responses on the prior e-mails. The e-mail exchanges became a virtual dialog with each participant.

On interpreting their answers and formulate more questions, I paid attention to Yin's advice to "interpret the answers fairly; be not trapped by existing ideologies or preconceptions; have a firm grasp of the issues of the issues being studied; and avoid biases by being sensitive to contrary evidence" (2014:73). Having a personal theological background, I phrased my questions to get answers as much as possible from the participants from their spiritual experience, avoiding any religious intervention with my personal theological view on the different issues. I see that aspect of my personal knowledge and religious background as positive for the case study.

Benefits of Interviewing

Interviewing certainly lies at the heart of the qualitative research method. Face-to-face interviewing has been a traditional integral part of research in the social and human sciences, and lately with the advance of new communication technologies, first with telephone and then with the Internet, interviews expanded to other forms besides the face-to-face method. New technologies did not substitute the traditional face-to-face method of interviewing, but added other options to the research field.

In *Learning From Strangers – The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*, Weiss (1994) developed and focused his qualitative research experience on the importance of interviewing, exploring the different facets of this vital component in qualitative research. Among many reasons on why interviewing is significant for the researcher's work, he states that:

Interviewing gives us a window to the past...we can also, by interviewing learn about settings that would otherwise be closed to us...interviewing rescues events that would otherwise be lost. The celebrations and sorrows of people not in the news, their triumphs and failures, ordinarily leave no record except in their memories...most of the significant events of people's lives can become known to others only through interview (p.2).

From the perspective of asking, listening, telling, and conversation, there are many aspects to be considered on interviewing, which can be described as "the ability to travel deeply and broadly into subjective realities" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002: 170). In this case study my purpose was to "travel deeply into subjective realities" of the

participants' spiritual experiences online, which I was able to get through the interviews.

Interviewing develops interpersonal relationships and views or meanings about issues and values between the interviewer and the interviewee, even through the exchange of e-mails. An illustration of it can be seen in an e-mail from one of the case study participants, who I only know through the e-mail exchange of the research questions, and wrote about a topic on the forums saying: "I HATE that they talk about it CONSTANTLY. UGHHH it bothers me. They cannot know the answer. Nilo!!! They can't KNOW for sure!!!" (personal communication by e-mail, July 2, 2013). It shows a sense of personal relationship that was only established virtually through e-mail, and reinforces Lindlof and Taylor's assumption on the validity of the use of e-mails for interviews. So considering that a qualitative interviewing is an adaptable method that can be used in different circumstances and environments, there is no limit on defining places with the use of e-mail as another form or way to do interviews instead of the traditional face-to-face model.

Interview by Email

The opportunities for interviewing through e-mail has brought up discussions and arguments in the research field with negative and positive reactions from researchers. Murray and Sixsmith (2003) see the use of e-mail in qualitative interviews as having the same value as face-to-face interviews, seeking to understand "personal

and shared meanings, thoughts, and feelings from the interviewee's perspective" (p.131). Aspects of time and space are relevant for the option of using email as an interview instrument. Geographic and timing constraints for some face-to-face interviews can be surpassed by e-mail interviews, and even expand the possible diversity of the research sample.

Another reason for considering the use of e-mail for interviews is to deal with sensitive issues or information. Studies have shown that people are more likely to talk about sensitive issues through an email interview than on a face-to-face situation. Sharing personal sensitive information through a computer seems less threatening than on a face-to-face conversation. The "social presence" factor can also be positively considered for the e-mail interview option.

The e-mail has become very accessible and can connect the researcher with subjects almost everywhere without the need of being in the same place, city, country, and the need of recording or writing down the answers to be sent to the researcher. E-mail can be stored for future retrieval, edited, forwarded, etc. Email gives the opportunity for the interviewees to think, write and reflect on their responses before sending them. On the other hand, respondents can be impulsive on their answers, which also can be analyzed as part of the data.

In *E-Mail Interviews in Qualitative Research: A Methodological Discussion*, Meho (2006) discusses the use of e-mail for conducting in-depth interviews by

analyzing different experiences from studies which used that method. Advantages of using email for interviewing are that it allows access to individuals often difficult or impossible to reach to interview face-to-face, decreases cost of recruiting large/geographically dispersed samples, and eliminates interviewer/interviewee effects resulting from visual and nonverbal cues or status difference between the two (e.g., race, gender, voice tone, dress, gestures, disabilities). On the other hand, the factors related to a face-to-face interview may have advantages in other ways.

For this case study, interviewing by email was my option, considering the nature of the study as being related to an online activity, with the participants acquainted with the digital form of communication in writing, due to their frequent activity on posting their thoughts and messages on the forums. So being interviewed through email was basically an extension of the way of communication that is part of their everyday life.

Ethics on Interviewing

On ethics of interviewing there are some basic principles that apply to academic research, both for qualitative and quantitative methods. Poindexter and McCombs (2000) list 17 aspects as an interviewer's protocol, under specific topics like, following directions and recording responses, conducting the interview, and ethical interviewing. Specifically under ethical principles, an interviewer should not reveal the

identity or answers of individual respondents, never falsify information on a questionnaire, and not be coercive to the respondent (106).

Ethical and personal influences are present very clearly in the qualitative research process, especially in a research relationship during the interviewing phase. That is a challenge for the interviewer because of the relationship that necessary needs to be established between the parties. Those relationships can be professional or personal. Heider (2000) experienced that challenge in a professional level relationship with his journalist colleagues in two different settings of newsrooms, especially by doing a participant observation work. Rubin & Rubin (2005) point out that, “as part of the developing relationship with the conversational partner, the researcher takes on deep ethical obligations” (p. 34). Here a parallel can be traced with my professional relation to the communication and especially to the religious field, related to my theological background and my church work and ministry.

As McCall and Simmons state, “the effect of the observer’s personal interests, values, and orientation are problems which are present in any research in which interaction of human beings is being studied” (p.104). Applying it to the present research topic and project, the religion aspect (religious affiliation and experience of the interviewees) was considered from an ethics perspective by me. From a sampling factor considering the access to the respondents as defined by Jensen (2002), to the

interaction with them, there is a thin line marked by ethical decisions and practices that need to be observed by the interviewer.

On the process of asking, listening, telling, and talking, there are many aspects to consider in an interview when “traveling deeply and broadly into subjective realities” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010: 170) that are important to be considered from an ethical perspective and for the validity of the data gathered. As McCall & Simmons (1969) state, “the effect of the observer’s personal interests, values, and orientation are problems which are present in any research in which interaction of human beings is being studied” (p. 104). That applies to my religious theological background on the process of conducting the interview through questions with religious and doctrinal/theological content. An ethical standard was observed by not crossing the line on influencing the interviewees on their personal doctrinal views, by formulating the questions through an ongoing e-mail exchange process.

In *Ethical issues in the study of religion and the new media*, Johns (2013) when referring to online methods and ethics, mention the challenges that social behavior researchers face on ethics when doing online studies, as the same applies to researchers in the field of online religion. As research methods are related to theories and ethics, they “are impacted by the research questions being posed, the context of the research online, the context of the researcher in real life, and the interests of those

who participate in the research” (p.241). Ethics were applied and followed strictly according to the IRB requirements applied to this case study.

On the next chapter (Chapter 4) there is a data analysis on the responses from each of the seven participants in this case study, and in Chapter 5, the conclusions resulting from the findings related to the key research questions of the study.

CHAPTER 4

Data Analysis

Participant Alpha

Alpha is a very active member of online forum groups, with thousands of posts on Worthy Christian Forums. He has been involved in online discussion groups for five years, according to his answer to a question about how long he has been participating in online forums. That reflects on research questions one, showing that some online participants have been engaged in online experience for a number of years.

In terms of research question three, whether online experience is substituting for traditional or offline church experience, when asked if he had been a church member, he said: “The only church I belong to is the one Christ made, which consists of every believer. I have been a believer for most of my life, though I did not always follow the Lord. I do not believe in denominations” (personal communication by e-mail, May 19, 2013). By not believing in denominations, he doesn’t frequent regularly a church, but he has gone to Evangelical, Non-Denominational, and Pentecostal churches, according to his answer to the question about his offline church experiences. He was involved in a variety of activities, from “construction to playing guitar, from home visits to working a weekly supper, preaching, teaching, and ran a homeless home” (personal communication by e-mail, May 19, 2013).

His offline church experiences showed him a variety of different contrasting doctrines, beliefs, structures and traditions he saw in different Christian denominations. He says:

Some churches claim one is not saved unless they are baptized. Another church will claim you do not have the Holy Spirit unless you speak in tongues. Another church will claim that the love of God accepts people who live in an active homosexual lifestyle as a true brother or sister in Christ, while yet another sounds so much like the world in order to draw the young lost crowd that it feels like I am attending a rock concert (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

The Christian church has been historically divided into different denominations, especially since the Reformation movement in the 16th Century. During the 15 first Centuries of the Christian era, the history of the Christian church is basically related to the Orthodox Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic Church (Engelbrecht, 2011). The Bible and the Christian documents of its interpretation, like Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and others, are ultimately related to the Christian church and its structural organization at any time.

Besides identifying the church as a denomination, there is also a theological/doctrinal concept of a spiritual church, which Alpha is mentioning, that can be related to the known confession of the Christian faith in the Apostle's Creed. That concept has its roots in the historic Christian church that through 20 Centuries preserves and considers the Bible as the Word of God. So any personal or collective

(denominational) concept of the larger church of Christianity will be connected with the history of the same Christian church, since its foundation in the First Century.

On a question about his participation at some different denominations and his view on being part of a church, Alpha stated his concept of church:

The true Church is not made up of man's doctrines, but by the Spirit of God. In each group there are true believers and false believers. God knows His own and draws His people together in a spiritual bond (personal communication by e-mail, May 22, 2013).

By not believing in denominations, but in a church made by Christ, as he mentioned, he was asked how he sees or perceives this church, or how is its shape, and if it's possible to know or to see that it's made by Christ. He answered saying that he knows and sees it "by the true inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Just as He witnessed us with the Father through Christ, He witnesses each of us as one in Him" (personal communication by e-mail, May 22, 2013).

So Alpha brings to his online faith practice, a background of participation in a traditional offline church format. From that experience he shows disappointment with the formal offline church structure, not accepting or believing in denominations, more specifically in a church he says it is made up of man's doctrines. Regarding to that he said:

I have found that many local denominations have a set list of doctrines you have to accept and sign your name to in order to be a member. That is not scriptural. Everyone who has accepted Jesus as Lord is already a member of His

church. Only man has made it a country club through personal acceptance of someone new (personal communication by e-mail, May 24, 2013).

On a question if his online experience had changed his concept of church, he said:

There is the church that Christ builds, and there is the church man has built. I prefer the church Christ built and this is the reason why I have not found one to attend. I have found that many who attend church are stuck on denominational beliefs, or doctrines, created by men that separate the Body of Christ. These are the battle grounds the enemy (Satan) has created and the walls are thick and strong (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

The concept of church appears in a spiritual dimension opposed to a structural denominational reality, with “thick and strong walls”, which does not fit with Alpha’s ideal Biblical concept of church. There are two views about a concept of church being expressed by Alpha, one based upon a personal understanding and interpretation of the Bible, and another which is collectively defined through a set of doctrines by Christian denominations.

His negative experiences with different denominations draw him away from those communities of faith, although his basic Biblical knowledge was initially founded and developed in those churches he attended and in which he had an active participation, by “preaching and teaching” as he had mentioned when he answered a question about his church experiences.

It shows he had some theological/doctrinal knowledge at that time already, and by leaving the offline church as a denominational organization because of doctrinal and practical issues, he brings to his online experience and to this study an important background from his spiritual journey. Alpha got involved with online Christian forums because he was not receiving in the offline churches he attended what he needed or wanted for his spiritual life.

When asked about his involvement with online discussion groups, and why did he get involved with them, he said: “I was looking for more than what was being provided through the churches I had been visiting. Even though I was active in a few programs they had, I was not being fed the Word and I craved for a deeper understanding, a closer walk with Christ” (personal communication by e-mail, May 22, 2013).

Alpha shows a reality of a participating offline church member who was not being spiritually satisfied, and with a need of a deeper understanding of the Bible to be spiritually nourished, since the Bible is the source of the Christian faith nourishment. In his studies on online religion and church online, scholar Tim Hutchings, found that people that leave the traditional churches to go online for their spiritual practices do it “due to theological differences, negative experiences, or the onset of a disability their church code not accommodate” (Hutchings, 2012:216), which relates to Alpha’s

decision to leave the offline church and join the online forums for his religious practices.

It can be perceived that there was something important lacking in Alpha's spiritual life, which was not being found or received in his offline church attendance and participation. That spiritual fulfillment he found on the Internet, on the Christian online forums. Spiritual content was one of the key reasons Alpha moved toward the Internet for his faith practices. That relates to the second key research question, on what kind of content the participants are looking for in the online forums.

Looking deeper into the reasons for leaving the offline church and moving to the Internet online forum groups, reflects on the fourth research question, on how the online forum participants are finding community in the virtual space. Alpha said: "I also did not feel that welcomed by the majority of those who attended the churches. They all seemed to have their own clique, so I sought to gain what I needed online and through the leading of the Holy Spirit" (personal communication by e-mail, May 22, 2013). There is an aspect of relationship and personal involvement with others at the offline church setting, where from a Christian perspective it is a family of brothers and sisters in Christ, and which has not been positive and spiritually valuable for Alpha.

The lack of friendly personal relationships and of spiritual content at the offline church moved Alpha toward the online experience and practice. By answering the question why he got involved with the forums and what made him stay in WCF, he said

that he had searched and participated on some other sites before settling at WCF. He was surprised with the new faith engagement, and discovered a new spiritual experience in a virtual place of relationships on the Internet by entering the online forums.

I was getting challenged, which required me to do my homework. It was not the threads where people tried to tell you what they believed that intrigued me, but those that asked me what I thought about what scripture meant. At first, I just gave answers, but was soon shown my error. This caused me to dig deep (personal communication by e-mail, May 22, 2013).

He realized a live and dynamic environment of new relationships whose interactions challenged him to grow in his faith and knowledge of the Bible, as well as being able to express it online, which he was not getting on his church attendance.

It required me to start using concordances (verbal index of the Bible), then word study dictionaries for both Hebrew and Greek to reading the copies of the original text through interlinear Bibles (parallel Bible text in Greek, Hebrew or Latin with a translation). I started to grow and become fed more and more. I knew I could not quit (personal communication by e-mail, May 22, 2013).

When asked about his experience before joining WCF, Alpha mentioned that at other sites there were forms of communication that he was not comfortable with, where personal attacks and insults were the norm, especially if the person would not agree with someone. This also reflects on the fourth research question, on how the online experience compares to an offline community,

showing that aggressive Internet communications may be an uncomfortable difference.

Aggressive language and wording has been shown on discussion forums on the Internet in general, where a non face-to-face communication setting influences harsh wording and reactions on discussions. That kind of attitude on the Internet is also known as flaming, as a hostile and insulting interaction between Internet users, especially on discussion forums. Lee (2006) suggests some behavioral strategies for dealing with flaming in online forums. Christian forums are not free from that kind of behavior, although it is normally mentioned on the website open page, that harsh wording and attacks will not be tolerated. For example the site *Theology Online* states: “Thou shall not use profanity or insinuated profanity on this forum” (www.theologyonline.com), and the *Lampstand Christian Forums* posts: “Please do not become aggressive or offensive when debating with people. Personal attacks will not be tolerated” (www.lampstandstudy.com).

Alpha said that he was looking for a site “where I could discuss without the fear of being attacked. At the same time, I was looking for a site that was not based on man’s doctrine, but wholly on His full word of Scripture – in other words, non-denominational in nature where everyone was welcomed” (personal communication by e-mail, May 24, 2013).

According to his statement, there is a sense of a safe social spiritual environment where he can express ideals and feelings “without being attacked”, which points to the issue of personal relationships within a sphere of group acceptance without conflicts. He mentioned that at WCF everyone is accepted “as long as they abide with the Terms of Service (see site description on Chapter 1). Worthy (WCF) is a site where people can ask questions and get honest, biblical answers, which forces the reader to search the scriptures” (personal communication by e-mail, May 24, 2013).

About the significance for participating in the forums, Alpha pointed to the relationship with others with whom he found a common bond, and an opportunity to connect with, in a wider spectrum.

I have found others who have the same inner moving in their spirit to grow closer to the Lord, not just by words, but how they live. Worthy is a place where people from all over the world gather to discuss Scripture, concerns, ask questions, encourage and pray for others. I know this may seem strange, but I feel closer to some members on Worthy than I had with some I knew in person (personal communication by e-mail, May 24, 2013)

The Internet provides a virtual place for interactions between people from any place in the world, at any time, who have a common desire to share information, and in this case, their faith experiences. His answer can be related to the first research question on how and in what ways the use of the Internet affects the participants’ religious experiences in online forums.

He identifies it as 'a place' where he meets people from all over the world to discuss the Bible content, to ask questions, to share concerns, to pray. It relates also to the sixth research question about how interactivity is present on the religious practices online. On that way, when defining interactivity, Downes & McMillan (2000) consider on the participant-based dimension, that the communication environment creates a sense of place. That is the sense of place Alpha found on the online forum groups. This has interesting relation to the fifth research question, on what is the Internet as a virtual religious experience doing to the concept of place (sanctuary, temple) and church in relation to the person's spiritual/religious experience.

When asked about his statement of feeling closer to some people online than with someone in person, he mentioned the aspect of readiness in communication and relationships as part of the reason to go online, comparing it with his former church experiences, as well the issues of personal relationships at church not being so meaningful as the ones he experience online.

I have found people are more willing to communicate online than face to face, and that is what I was looking for. In the churches I have gone to, many would draw back when it comes to talking to a stranger deeper than the polite "Welcome" or "Come Back" greetings offered. Social phobia and personal cliques is a couple of reasons for divisions within the local churches. Perhaps your hair is the wrong length, or your choices of clothes are not fitting to some. Maybe you have a beard, or too much makeup. It could be the tattoos or the earrings. When you see someone in person, the first natural thing to do is to judge their appearance... this is not done online (personal communication by e-mail, May 31, 2013).

The behaviors mentioned are part of the human society attitudes in any place, including in church, which is a part of the social fabric also Christians belong. The attitude of judgment, which is clearly condemned by Christ in any circumstance, and part of the Christian faith, was something that strongly affected his participation in the offline church. By considering the Christian principles of love and forgiveness in relationships, Alpha didn't find them in the offline churches, so he looked for them in a new virtual community. A spiritual need and a lack of social positive relationships, plus doctrinal beliefs and practices in the traditional offline churches supported his move toward an online religious experience.

I would say that because of the churches I had attended, and my experiences in them, they are the reason why I started going online seeking a place where I can find a group who believe fully in scripture without the legalism or Universalist Theology, but all of Scripture (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

He mentioned legalism and Universalist Theology, which are common in many Christian denominations today. Legalism can be identified as a church emphasis on a series of particular biblical laws, normally taken out of the context, to be followed, and Universalist Theology, as a liberal concept of the Gospel, which from the historic traditional Christian doctrine, both are biblically distorted. Alpha was looking for biblical content to nourish his faith, which he did not get in his offline church. That

relates to the second research question, about what kind of content the participants are looking for in the online forums.

The offline churches he attended, by their nature and structure, did not present the opportunity for him to get involved in a dialog about the content being presented through a dynamic of communication with the leaders or even among the members. This responds to research question six, on how interactivity affects the online religious practices in the forums. It seems to show that sometimes more direct dialogue is possible online.

When entering a church, there is the leadership that represents the “doctrine” of the church, where the Pastor or Priest is the one who they follow.” The Pastor is in the pulpit and teaches on what he believes the word (Bible) says about a subject, but your personal study is not in agreement with his teachings. There is no allowance for speaking up and asking questions, or offering up a different understanding of what the scripture says. Instead, people sit quietly and take in what the Pastor stated...the church man has created does not sit well in my spirit (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

Alpha shows a need of active participation in church in order to nourish his faith and be an active member of his community of believers. The offline churches he attended, which he defines as “church man has created”, don’t “sit well” in his spirit. There is a connection from what Alpha reveals here with what scholar Peter Horsfield writes about Theology in digital media, saying: “Theology will be open for the audience to participate in, to adapt to their own situations, and to make their own contributions” (Horsfield, 2012, p. 257).

When asked to compare his traditional spiritual offline church experience with the online experience, Alpha said:

That would be like comparing apples and oranges. They both are food, both are round, both are good for you, but both offer different vital nutrients. Online sites cannot replace the closeness one gets from a local gathering of the saints. Yet, they can offer a wider degree of biblical knowledge and cultural information about what is going on in other parts of the world by those who live there (personal communication by e-mail, May 24, 2013).

There are two important aspects mentioned which seem conflicting and paradoxical in his statements comparing his offline church experience with the online experience. Each experience has its unique value for him, and each of them offers its unique nutrients, compared to fruits. He realizes that an online relationship “cannot replace the closeness one gets from a local gathering of the saints” (meaning the Christian family, also named in the Apostles’ Creed as the “communion of saints”). His answer is pointing to the third research question on to what extent is the use of the Internet substituting for the traditional church experience, and also to the fourth question four, about how the two kinds of experiences compare.

Alpha is revealing that there is a personal physical relationship and a sense of community in a local church that cannot be experienced online, or in a virtual community.

When you do find someone you can connect with at a local church, the connection is much deeper than with someone who lives across the world because there is a real smile to the name, or an invite to their personal life by

joining them in some activity (personal communication by e-mail, May 31, 2013)... there is no replacing the personal love one can gain from true personal relationships with someone you can actually touch" (personal communication by e-mail, May 24, 2013).

Besides his active spiritual and faith practices online, Alpha reveals a need and a profound desire to be part of a different church from those he has attended, considering the physical human relationship which he sees and feels not being part of a virtual community of believers.

My online time does not replace the church at all. If anything, it increases the desire to find a local gathering where people follow scripture in its fullest, creating a deeper desire to find such a group. I find myself longing for the day when this will happen (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

While his faith experiences in offline churches have been disappointing due to different conflicting doctrines and practices of denominations, plus personal relationships within the churches he attended, at the same time, he not only values the traditional/physical offline church as he also would like to be part of one, without those issues and problems he has experienced when attended them. I asked him how he sees his online faith practices leading him to his desired kind of church, and his response was: "Don't know if it ever will, to be honest. As I have stated, the true church consists of all who have accepted Jesus as their Savior, no denominational name given" (personal communication by e-mail, July 4, 2013).

On the other hand, Alpha sees a value online which the offline church doesn't offer, according to his personal church experiences. Online religious interaction offers a wider degree of biblical knowledge and cultural information about what is going on in other parts of the world by those who live there. By describing what his online religious practice is doing to his spiritual/religious experience differently than from his traditional offline church experience, he mentioned the different attitude people have when engaging in a dialogue of encouragement and strength, as well the aspect of communicating face-to-face versus in writing. His answer relates to the fourth research question on how the online forum participants are finding community in the virtual space, and how it does compare to an offline community for them.

I have found online people more willing to encourage and strengthen than when face to face. For me, I find being more encouraging and supportive easier online because I have the time to consider my response and seek His leading in situations. Face to face does not allow this due to the spontaneous reaction to what is presented to you. People are expected to give a response right away (personal communication by e-mail, May 31, 2013).

Alpha's experience matches with what Nancy Bayam found about community in her book *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, listing "five qualities found in both online groups and many definitions of community that make the term resonate for online context. The sense of space, shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities, and interpersonal relations" (Bayam, 2010, p. 75). When talking

about his church attendance experience, Alpha describes what he saw and experienced regarding peoples attitude toward encouragement and strength of relationships and faith.

I have found that too many “catch phrases” are presented in person like “Bless Your Heart” or “Praise God” without depth, becoming just words with no real feeling or understanding why they just said that, as in an automated response. There is nothing wrong with those words, but too many times they lack depth, and a person can feel that in their spirit...I like to consider my words before I say anything (personal communication by e-mail, May 31, 2013).

Comparison of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) versus face-to-face communication arises from Alpha’s offline church experiences and in his online experiences, pointing to writing as being preferred over face-to-face communication, and relating it to the sixth research question on how interactivity affects the online religious practices in the forums.

Online, you can take the time to ensure what you are writing is what you really want to say. In person, it is hard to reverse the immediate response of choosing the wrong words which end up portraying the wrong message... there is no delete key in person and we do make mistakes. I do write much better than I speak in person (personal communication by e-mail, May 31, 2013).

On analyzing this topic, it’s important to consider that the Christian church place of worship is profoundly and historically connected to a temple or a sanctuary as the place of worship and religious activities, which also relates to liturgical and ritual expressions and concepts.

Research question five was addressed by Alpha, on what is the Internet as a virtual religious experience doing to his concept of place (sanctuary, temple) and church, since both experiences were part of Alpha's religious practices. Although he sees an unnecessary human setting for spiritual experiences in the Christian faith, pointed in his answer, he also sees worship as a unique expression of faith when done among people physically present. "There is nothing like worshiping with others in person. I cannot worship like this on the Internet. There are no comparisons at all. This is where online loses its value" (personal communication by e-mail, June 8, 2013). Alpha's statement relates to my fifth research question about what the spiritual virtual experience is causing to the concept of place, considering the traditional church place for that being a sanctuary or temple.

To keep the questions in context, it's also significant to refer that the practice of worship in the Christian tradition has been a collective act and associated to a place. Following the history of Christianity, starting with the people of Israel in the Bible, God gave clear and precise instructions, first to Moses about the Tabernacle, during the Exodus, and later to Solomon about the construction of the temple, as being special places of His presence and of worship. God gave Solomon very specific architectural details about the structure, the size, and the shape of the temple, as well as the interior with its symbolic adornment, for being a special place of worship (1 Kings 6).

Later the synagogues were established and used for that, as Jesus used them, as well as the apostles, especially Paul. Jesus was taken by his parents to the temple as a child at least twice, calling it “my Father’s house” (Luke 2) and later in his ministry he went into the temple and cleared it from vendors and merchandising, saying “my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Mark 11:17). It shows that there is a Biblical meaning for a place of worship. The New Testament church is freed from the Old Testament Law (Galatians 3:25) and that includes worshipping God in any place at any time. There is no obligation to worship in a specific place or building. But there is up to today, in the Christian churches, the continued use of churches, temples or sanctuaries as places of worship or spiritual activities. And not only the place, but also the use of symbols and liturgies are linked with being there in that physical place.

When asked how worship is being substituted on his online spiritual/faith experience, Alpha said:

I have learned to worship God in everything, all day long. Worship, like everything else, does not have to be done within the confines of a building. We can be thankful for everything anytime during the day... there is no substitute at all, just a different location. Worship is done from the heart and can be done anywhere. Because of this, substitute is not a word I would choose to describe the location/separation. To be honest, I use to look forward going to church until I realized that I can have church anywhere, anytime. To me, this is the true freedom I find in Christ (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

In these statements the concept of worship has a broader or different meaning from the traditional understanding of worship as a collective liturgical event in a place,

as a temple, sanctuary or at an outside set. And when asked if his present online activity, regarding to his spiritual life was fulfilling his spiritual needs, he said that, “there will never be a replacement for a true one-on-one personal relationship. This is how God created us” (personal communication by e-mail, June 8, 2013). There is a perception that something is lacking on Alpha’s spiritual online experience, which relates to human relationships and face-to-face communication in the practice of faith.

And when asked on how and in what dimension the virtual interaction and experience has affected his faith in life, he mentioned the benefit of his online religious spiritual activity:

It has caused me to feed on His word more, which increases my faith. To give an answer online, where there are many sharp believers, one must dig deeper into the word than when discussing in person. I often use Hebrew and Greek word study dictionaries to understand the content and context in which the words were first spoken, allowing me to apply the original meaning to today’s situations. I cannot carry around and take the necessary time to do the research when discussing in person (personal communication by e-mail, June 8, 2013).

To a question on how the virtual religious online practices have affected his social relationships, especially regarding church relationships, Alpha mentioned that basically most of the church relationships were replaced by the online relationships. The main reason is because of not being integrated into a church anymore. He had looked for one, but had not found one and joined it, mainly due to doctrinal differences, as he points out:

Some are legalistic, one is seeker friendly, one is new age mixed with Christianity, and one is a school for prophets, as if being a Prophet can be taught in a school. I believe completely in the inner dwelling of the Holy Spirit who teaches and guides a believer, not leaving out any scripture in favor of denominational doctrine (personal communication by e-mail, June 8, 2013).

On a question if the online experience was replacing his church social relationship (RQ3), he mentioned that the word “replacing” was not the best or right term he would use to answer the question. He doesn’t see his online experience replacing his church social relationships. He said:

Those online who are my brothers and sisters are just as much brothers and sisters as those in my community. It is like having a friend who has moved away. You can still be friends, but at a longer distance. I have not “substituted” or “replaced” anyone or anything. I find myself in a situation I am not happy with trying to make the best of what is available (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

By answering a question on what has been the impact of the online experience at the forums on Alpha’s biblical/doctrinal knowledge, he said:

Here is where my experience with Worthy (WCF) has been a blessing. We speak of scripture all the time, not just one or two days a week. To ensure that I do not lead anyone astray, I have to dig deep into the Word (Bible) to understand as much as possible about the meaning behind the words. I depend greatly on the teaching from the Holy Spirit who has taught me more than all the Sunday studies I had done in church (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

And by comparing the small Bible classes in the offline churches where he had participated in the past, with the present online experience, he said:

Online there are many more who will challenge what is posted, offering up more questions and ideas than a classroom where the teacher is there to teach and students are to listen. I have also been introduced to more study tools online than I ever was in church. A comparison would be in church, if you had a concordance you were considered to be a deep student. Online, a concordance alone is barely skimming the surface where digging into the Hebrew and Greek to understand the culture and times is the beginning of understanding (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

Alpha mentioned as sources of his spiritual growth different online sites where he can use Bible Concordances with different Bible versions; online interlinear Bible (English and Greek or Hebrew original texts), as well as Bible dictionaries.

I can tell you that I have changed to a deeper understanding far more than I would of if I only met once a week...a deeper understanding of salvation, deeper understanding of how Christ works in and through us with the Holy Spirit, and how to choose my words better when discussing what I do believe (personal communication by e-mail, July 4, 2013).

When asked about the most important doctrines of the Christian faith that were nurtured or changed through his online experience, Alpha said that most of his beliefs were strengthened and not changed, with the exception of one biblical interpretation in the book of Revelation. He has gained a better understanding “on the gifts of the Spirit, our next life, Revelation, and most importantly, how to hear the Lord and follow Him” (personal communication by e-mail, July 4, 2013).

The six years of Alpha's spiritual journey on the Internet show many elements for answering the research questions for this study. The discussion and conclusions will be developed in Chapter 5 of this case study.

Participant Beta

Beta is an active member of Worthy Christian Forums. Answering to a first question about for how long time she has been part of online Christian discussion groups, she said it has been for eight years. When asked about offline church attendance, she told she has been a member of three different churches, but at this time she is not attending any offline church.

I must have gotten "saved" a hundred times. They always preached about hell, fire, and brimstone. It scared me to the altar. I've been to so many altar calls. I responded to fear, and the odd tugging at my heart. I didn't know what it meant really" (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013).

Beta started going to church as a child, attending Vacation Bible Schools on summers at her relatives' churches. Her sister took her to one church denomination and her aunt to another church denomination. As her aunt and her uncle were coming to pick her up every Sunday to take her to church, she joined that church. Beta's information about her church participation shows that her connections with the churches he attended were through her sister and through her extended family, and not through her parents.

When asked to describe her offline church experiences, Beta shared a positive involvement and participation she had, by singing in the choir, doing puppet ministry, attending Sunday school, Bible studies, prayer meetings, and participating in “expressive worship” (liturgical dance and sign language).

At that point in my life I did anything and everything at church that I could. I was a teenager and it was my life. My church took me to missionary camps, summer camps, Christian concerts, it was a lot of fun, and for a while I felt like I made some kind of difference in the world... I loved God, and I loved participating in that life style. I was the resident “bible thumper” in high school, but at the time I didn’t care, I just wanted people to know who God was (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013).

Beta’s active and young blooming leadership in the church made her a delegate of her church state conference, “which meant I had to sit in on boring, crazy, political meetings about policies and changes that needed to be voted on” (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013). That was a time when she realized conflicting people’s attitudes between what was been said and was done in the church, comparing what was preached or believed by those people and their attitudes. Despite that, she continued attending church, and even was trained as one of the first groups of young adult Lay Speakers for her state. She ended up leaving that church, pointing out as reasons racism, issues with the congregation, and lack of growth.

Beta had some painful disappointing experiences with a couple of churches, which caused her to leave them with spiritual conflicts about her faith and relationship

with God. Those experiences “affected my personal faith because it made me question the sort of label of ‘Christianity’... I realized that the ministries I was a part of were there for their entertainment and not as much for helping others to know Jesus” (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

By answering a question on how the church experiences affected her personal faith, she described a specific hurtful situation related with her mentor at the church, who meant very much to her, being her closest friend. She wrote:

I had something really traumatic happen and she totally let me down. She was awful to me and for someone who at times was definitely the hands and voice of God for me; it was devastating for her to betray me like that...That was really sort of another catalyst for my faith changing so much at that time (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

At her last offline church, Beta had also a negative experience. It happened when she got sick, stopped attending church, and there was no care or attention given to her.

My last church showed me that the church doesn’t care about its’ members. It’s a clique, a social, almost hierarchical clique. Obviously, I was not a part, since no one noticed I stopped coming and then left all together. Since no one called at all to find out what happened to me or to check on me. They knew I was sick, I had asked for prayer, yet no one once followed up on that...I felt isolated, like I didn’t belong...One of their mottos is, ‘Sharing God’s hope, love, and healing’. I was a wreck” (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

Still talking about her church experiences, Beta mentioned an unexpected experience related to her faith she had in college. She described it as having had an impact on her religious beliefs, which drastically changed her perspective on God, on faith and on religion. She went to a Christian college where, according to her she had great professors, all highly respectable Christians, who taught from a sort of unbiased view. Her academic experience with classes in Religion and History especially, plus the behavior of students who claimed to be Christians, drew her apart from the Christian faith. She mentioned she had a period of time where she thought there was no way God existed. It was one of her History professors who helped her to understand and to see through a biologic principle the existence and presence of God in this world as being the presence of love. She said:

As Biology major that made sense to me. It resonated with me. I clung to the idea that God is love and that is reason enough for me to believe he exists. So college destroyed what I thought I knew about what I believed and rebuilt it into something different (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

On the question why she did get involved in online religious forums, she answered that it happened when she was heartbroken and lost on online chats, and a member of WCF invited her to join it. She joined it for many reasons:

To talk to like-minded people, to ask questions, for fellowship mainly. I had PTSD (Post Traumatic Syndrome Drama) and horrible nightmares/night terrors. I was alone, and terrified. I used Worthy often, as a place to sort of avoid being alone with myself at night. Worthy (WCF) was a refuge from the storm. There was laughter there, community, hope, and most of all, love. I know that might

sound strange to you, love from people I've never met, and probably never will meet, online - on a social media- on the Internet, but it was true (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013).

She mentioned also that at WCF she got friends who helped her through one of the hardest times in her life, when everything seemed to be lost for her. Beta's answer answers relates to my first research question, on how and in what ways the use of the Internet affects religious experiences online.

College wrecked my faith. Life wrecked it. Pain wrecked it. Church wrecked it. I was so lost. I needed and still need some light on my path and Worthy WCF) is a tangible beacon for me. I can ask questions, read research, pray with people, laugh, cry, share my struggles and my truth with people (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013).

Beta was asked how she would describe WCF as "being a refuge from the storm," considering that that "refuge" is considered a "virtual place". "Maybe it's my generation? I view online as just as important as real world. When you are alone, hurting and searching for something, any connection is better than none at all. Refuge is refuge no matter what it looks like or sounds like" (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

On the concept and meaning of a "virtual refuge place" Beta brings up how sense of family and community are important on her online experience.

Some of the people on Worthy (WCF) are like a family to me. They've known me for so long. Some chatters know my real name, and address me as such. They know my situation and keep up-to-date with what's going on with me.

They ask about things and pray for me, and we share details of our lives together. We are friends. I've spoken with some of them on the telephone (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

Friendship is part of Beta's online experience. "They are real friends no matter how virtual our encounter may be. We fight like friends, cry together, and rejoice together like 'real' friends do" (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013). Beta mentioned that she had once a dating experience with a forum member. I asked her if that was common on WCF, and she said it is not common, but sometimes happen. She said she knows a couple of marriages that resulted from people meeting at the WCF forums, although that is not the purpose of the forums.

The online forums were a place for Beta to get connected to a community that was open to hear and support her in a troubled time of her life. She relates it to one of her favorite's songs from the movie *Rent*, with the line "It is connection in an isolating age", and she says:

Sometimes your friends aren't enough. Sometimes you need people from different backgrounds, different perspectives, and different places in life to help you see more clearly... Sometimes you need a safe place to argue with people or a harbor to dock your boats and barges of questions, doubts and fears (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013).

By dealing with sleep troubles, the forums on the Internet provided a special "place" for Beta to connect with people from the entire world that are online 24/7 considering the different time zones where they live. "As an insomniac, most people in

“real life” are asleep in the middle of the night. Chat rooms and online discussion groups give me an outlet for those times where I cannot access anyone physically in the real world” (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013).

The aspect of anonymity is mentioned to support the benefit of being part of the forums for online interactions.

I can type things that are far too hard or sad or triggering to talk about with my voice. My fingers open up a world of opportunity that is not hindered by fear of being heard by someone, by saying the wrong thing or someone I know sharing information I’d rather them not share (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013).

She mentioned also, that people usually are more honest online. “You can get away with being totally personal and true because they cannot see you. They can judge you if they want, and some do, but you do not have to sit in that uncomfortable tension like you do if it’s actually face to face” (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013). I asked her about the reasons for staying at the forums and she said that the main reason for her to stay for all these years in the online discussion forums has been being part of a community and for the need of spiritual answers she couldn’t find in the “real world”.

Being part of WCF during several years, Beta was asked how she would describe her experience as a member of an “online community”, and how that community developed, changed, and moved. She said:

You realize at some point that online people/relationships suffer the same problems that real life ones do. Communication is tricky. And the fact that you cannot see body language, intent, emotions conveyed over text, sometimes it causes problems. Learning to deal with that has changed my involvement in the community itself (personal communication by e-mail, July 7, 2013).

The aspect of interactivity, which relates to the sixth research question, on how interactivity affects the online religious practices in the forums, arises in her answer. She perceives that miscommunication happens relatively to her way of interacting online and in person. "I am often seen as 'intense'. People take me the wrong way no matter what I do, whether it's online or in person. I hate it. People do love you though" (personal communication by e-mail, July 7, 2013). Beta shows a deep feeling regarding community and relationships on her online experiences at WCF:

At first you know people by their screen names. You kind of don't know anyone. Then you get more comfortable with people. You develop friendships. Some of my friends would send my real life birthday card. Or presents to help encourage me. I've gotten several interesting things from all over the world... I still have cards that people gave me a few years ago. Christian music CDs, Christian books, and just little keepsakes (personal communication by e-mail, July 7, 2013).

She also mentioned the issue of privacy and trust in her online forum experiences: "It's not always a good idea to give out your address to people on the internet, but at a certain point, a level of trust is established" (personal communication by e-mail, July 7, 2013). When asked about the significance of participating in the Christian forums, Beta answered:

It helps me feel connected to a world that so often I don't want to be a part of. It gives me support when "real" people are inaccessible. Sometimes, I find God there. Sometimes, I find utter, absolutely maddening irritation and frustration (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

By answering a question on what she meant by "sometimes finding God there" online, in one of her prior answers, she said:

Every now and then. Not every day. Not every time I log on. But on occasion, I feel like the Holy Spirit meets me there, in things that people say, in writings that they post, and sometimes just in my spirit I feel like God is there beside me (personal communication by e-mail, June 23, 2013).

Regarding the research question to compare the offline church experience with the online experience (RQ4), Beta answered with a list of similarities between meeting people online and face-to-face in church, saying: "The same churchy, haughty, fluffy, spiritualness is often present on the boards (forums) and even in chat" (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013). The difference she pointed was regards the setting of a church worship service where everyone is expected to sit and stay the whole time and there is no opportunity to react, agreeing or disagreeing with the preacher on a dialog about what is being said, as well as it is rude to get up and leave.

Being online:

If I don't like what is being said [at church], it's rude to get up and leave. If I don't like what's being said in chat, I can disagree and get booted (not that I do that lol) or at least converse about it. I can walk away from the computer... if I don't like what's being said in chat, I can disagree...or at least converse about

it... I can walk away from the computer... and come back later. I can't do that in a physical church (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

Her statements are related to the fourth research question on how the online practice compares with the offline church practices. Another difference mentioned by Beta relates to her short attention span, and the possibility to be discussing multiple topics at once online, having multiple windows open at a time: "At church, I am stuck in a very hard, uncomfortable pew or chair watching someone speak, and singing songs I do not care about, doing traditions that I do not understand or even believe in" (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

On the other hand, in a paradoxical statement, she remembers some intense and meaningful spiritual experiences at camp events and at regular church activities:

I've never 'felt' God's presence online like I have surrounded by other people my age crying out to a God they are desperate to connect to. There is something powerful about worshipping together and really sort of being vulnerable before God. It's a sort of mountain top experience, raw and beautiful. I wish I had more of those moments (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

As referring to worship, she was asked to compare her spiritual experience in an offline church setting/space, like in a sanctuary or temple, with a virtual "space" of religious practices, as she does online. Beta's answer brought light to the fifth research question, on what is the Internet as a virtual religious experience doing to her concept

of place (sanctuary, temple) and church in relation to her spiritual/religious experiences.

It's definitely different. Online is more personal in a way, because you share things online that you don't in a traditional church setting. For me, it's a different mind frame though. I feel more connected mentally at a traditional church than online. It's hard to stay focused when you are multitasking on the computer...It's not set aside time for God really. It's just time that you happen to be discussing God, and spiritual things (personal communication by e-mail, June 23, 2013).

Beta shows two kinds of feelings about religious practices by comparing her offline church experience with her online experience. By talking about her engagement in church programs she said: "I am kinesthetic. I learn by doing, touching, seeing, and feeling. When I would dance and do drama and things for God, I felt like I was giving him all of me, every part, mind, body, soul and all" (personal communication by e-mail, June, 2013).

At the same time, she acknowledged a reality of worship online, saying: "you can truly worship God online" (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013). Following my question on how worshipping God online happens, she says: "Worship is not always singing, or hymns or even scripture. Sometimes it's an attitude, an attitude of praise. Thanking God for the small things. Talking about God in general, to me is an act of Worship" (personal communication by e-mail, July 2, 2013).

Beta's concept of worship is related to community, while she doesn't distinguish between a traditional community and an online community:

Talking about his love and spending time together as people, talking about God. It doesn't have to look like church for it to be church. Church is simply the body of Christ. It's not a building. It's not a location. It's a community. And whether that happens in a building or virtually doesn't seem like it should matter to me (personal communication by e-mail, July 2, 2013).

On the online experience, when asked what is virtual doing to her spiritual/religious experience, Beta said that it enhances it, while she is not going to church now, which relates to the third research question about to what extent is the use of the Internet substituting for the traditional (offline) church experience. "The connection and discussion about God that I get online, is the only source of that in my life right now. If I didn't have it, then I wouldn't have any contact really with that side of my life" (personal communication by e-mail, June 23, 2013).

When answering a question on how and in what dimension the virtual interaction and online experience has affected her faith, she said it has increased it. "There was a point where I had totally given up on the idea of God. And coming back to Worthy (WCF) helped me to hold onto God, expand my views, and grapple with faith" (personal communication by e-mail, July 2, 2013). Beta's answer relates back to the first research question on how the Internet affects the participants' religious experiences in online forums.

On a question about how the virtual spiritual experience has affected her social/church past or present relationships, Beta answered that she finds online relationships just as meaningful as real world relationships, and since she is not attending a church, her social relationships are with the online forum members.

“I have many people I care about. Many relationships with different dynamics... People that I love, that are my friends that I really care about” (personal communication by e-mail, July 7, 2013).

When asked what has been the impact of the online experience on Beta’s biblical knowledge and doctrines, she revealed that on certain doctrines like about God, Jesus, sin, and forgiveness, the experience online helped her to understand and to develop her knowledge on that, while other Christian doctrines like faith, salvation, baptism, are not clear to her yet. The topics she most likes in the forums are the ones about people’s experiences with God, news about her friends (on Personal Messages), and about forgiveness.

Beta says she has found online spiritual answers to her questions and support in some very difficult times in her life. At one time she was going through a harsh moment in the life, and desperately asked for prayers. An instant reaction on the forum board came from different people, from different places in the world, some who knew her by her username from discussion boards, others not. The messages were from prayers to Bible texts to words of encouragement, and after some days she

could tell them with gratitude that Christ brought back peace to her life. She said: “Worthy (WCF forum members) helped to answer many spiritual questions throughout the years. How do they answer them? With stories, scriptures, advice, prayer, and love” (personal communication by e-mail, July 7, 2013).

Participant Gamma

Gama has been part of Worthy Christian Forums (WCF) for two years, and prior to that he had an exciting time as a church member for three years, having a frustrating experience at the end of those years of church involvement. He described it as a time of intense participation in all church activities, coming early to the church, leaving late, joining the choir, and even having invited almost everyone of the church members for a dinner in his home, at least once during that time. Problems began when he started to disagree with the pastor on church and Bible issues, and the pastor “ended up labeling me contrary and unteachable and pushed me out of the church” (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013). When asked why he was considered “unteachable”, he said that the pastor was unable to deal with him by being a person with certain health emotional problems, as also he didn’t agree with the pastor on his teachings.

Based on Gamma’s testimony of having had a vivid faith experience and then a frustration with the same church, he was asked about his prior church experiences. He said he had been sent to Sunday school as a child, and later he attended a church

because of his wife wanted him to attend, so he went with her. He came to believe in God through the Alcoholic Anonymous program. His testimony is that God at that time was simply the Spirit of the Universe, but:

Upon hearing the gospel again, in... 2008 I understood in my innermost being that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that the bible is true... it clicked with me that the God I came to believe in was introducing himself to me and my life has not been the same since (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

He mentioned that he got involved with online religious forums to seek a place to discuss biblical issues outside the church, since his knowledge of the Bible was minimal, and at the same time he was looking for a community where he could seek to understand Christianity. That relates to the second research question, on what kinds of content are the participants looking in the online forums. He looked for an online place to fulfill his spiritual needs on understanding and growing in his Christian faith, which he was not able to achieve in his church.

Gamma looks for a church described in the Bible Book of Acts, on chapters 2 and 4, where the Christian church was founded on the day of Pentecost in the Jewish calendar of the Old Testament, with the first Christians becoming a unique community of people that loved each other, and had everything in common. Also under the leadership of Jesus' disciples and apostles the church grew and was a testimony of God's love and power. He has not found that kind of church, and he says that the closest to that he found was the tables of Alcoholism Anonymous, where men and

women seek to know God and learn to love others as themselves. He has a life story deeply marked by troubled youth experiences, which he recognizes today, have resulted in much suffering to him. "I have been misguided on an inner spiritual level in ways that are very disturbing though I have believed them all to be perfectly real and true only to find out that I was living under a cleverly crafted delusion" (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

By comparing the offline church with the online experience, Gamma shares the benefits his online religious practices brought to him. It relates to the third research questions on to what extent is the use of the Internet substituting for traditional church experience.

One of the greatest gifts of Worthy (WCF) and my online experience has been tolerance and understanding of opposing viewpoints. It was during my time at Worthy that I came to believe that we as humans are all subject unto having a subjective opinion of an objective reality due to that which took place in the fall of man. How can I not be patient and tolerant of views that contradict my own except they be dangerous when held? I did not get that in any church experience. No, what I got in church was divisiveness as they drew the lines in the sand and said plainly that anyone who does not agree with their position is wrong (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013).

The aspect of anonymity appears on his response to the question on how he compares the offline church experiences with his online religious experiences. He mentioned that he doesn't know the people with whom he interacts online in the forums, with exception to one man, who came from another state to visit with him for

a week. Then he makes a surprising statement saying that “neither my affiliation with a Christian Church or an online forum has been beneficial in the respect of seeking sobriety of mind that includes mental and emotional stability. But I have found that in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous” (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

Gamma struggles with his past addiction experiences and says his purpose in life now is to be sober and help others who are addicted to some form of substance to achieve sobriety, and in that way he has not gotten from a church or at the online forums the help he needs for his purpose related to addictions. And looking specifically into his online experiences in the forums, Gamma was asked what is lacking on that, and he said:

What is lacking in the online experience is the face to face conversations where one’s countenance can be observed along with body language which bring in elements of reality that cannot be obtained through writing alone. Though Paul wrote to many and we have his writings as aids in understanding God's purpose in our lives, Paul was most effective in person as it speaks of in the Thessalonians epistles (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013).

On a question about how he sees an online community, which relates to the fourth research question, on how the online forum participants are finding community in the virtual space, he said that he sees it not as a true (physical) community. And regarding the online forums, when asked what Gamma considers being important for him to be there, he pointed to a place. “A place where I can discuss openly the things

that I have come to believe and receive objective criticism from others with opposing perspectives or confirmation from those who agree with my position” (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013). By considering it a place, he was asked how he compares his spiritual experience at an online “place” with his traditional offline church setting in a sanctuary or temple, which relates to the fifth research question about what is the internet as a virtual religious experience doing to the concept of place (sanctuary/temple) and church on the person’s spiritual/religious experience.

His response was that “I don't have a separate spiritual experience in church or online because my spiritual experience is dependent wholly upon that which transpires within my body as the Spirit of God is interacting with me alongside the evil that is present with me when I would to do good” (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013). While saying that his spiritual religious experiences are the same online or in church, Gamma explained how he perceives it. His online experience is not about singing and praying with others physically present.

It does not replace my real life encounters with other Christians. I do not believe that a building or location or activity in general is anything more than a wrote religious practice. My spiritual experience is dynamic in nature and does not follow a schedule or liturgy (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013).

He doesn’t see replacement on the two religious or spiritual activities, and he says that the online experience cannot provide for him a substitute for his in person

experience, because they are distinctively different. There is a paradoxical perception on seeing the two experiences as the same, and at the same time, revealing that the “in person” experience is an important experience that cannot substitute for the online forums.

Following his view about a personal experience, he was asked how important he sees the personal face-to-face communication and relationships in his faith practice and spiritual life, and he sees it as very important. “Online communications are wrought with error that is based in faulty reasoning of those who are conversing by adding in imaginations to the communications to make up for that which they do not perceive in body language, or inflection that is not present in them” (personal communication by e-mail, June 19, 2013). That relates to the sixth research question on how interactivity affects the online religious practices in the forums.

Looking for the impact the Internet had on Gamma’s religious practices, he was asked how the virtual interaction and experience has affected his faith in life, and he said it has helped him to understand the difference between online interpersonal discussions and face to face encounters with people.

It has allowed me to open myself up to understanding that there are a myriad of ways to perceive that which God has said and therefore invite much confusion into the mind concerning spiritual things while allowing me to see the ever present need to clearly seek God through the Spirit in all matters whether he be in me or in my fellow Christians (personal communication by e-mail, June 19, 2013).

On the same way, he was asked how has the virtual spiritual experience / practice affected his social/church relationships, and he said that it has been grossly affected by error.

The problem is not outside of me trying to get in. The problem is inside of me trying to get out and is willing to use any avenue to get its way, including deceit and delusion based in twisting the truth and working to give me a perverse self-righteous attitude in my practical life. Always willing to seek to get me to do the right thing with the wrong motives (personal communication by e-mail, June 19, 2013).

On personal relationships built from the online forums participation, Gamma had a few experiences where online friends turned from a virtual relationship into an in person relationship. When asked what has been the impact of his online experience in the forums on his biblical/doctrinal knowledge about God, faith, sin, salvation, baptism, and other Christian doctrines, he said that the major impact has been helping him to reduce dogma and understanding that his opinion is just an opinion.

Gamma shows a mix of hurting experiences, feelings, and attitudes that are present in his life, which affected his spiritual experience in church, and which he brings to his virtual community, as part of his faith practices online. It relates to his point of views on issues that sometimes cause controversies within the forums, as it happened in his prior offline church with his pastor and others.

Participant Delta

Delta has been involved with online forums for a year and a half. He was raised in a Christian family, baptized by his father when at the age of nine, and has been an active church member for over 20 years, with different experiences at local churches, participating in small groups, Bible studies, young adults, and work with children, and involved in the community with an outreach program of his church. At this time, he is no longer part of a church, where he felt people were judgmental, and it was not going as well as he expected.

Both my wife and I felt like we needed a change. We also didn't agree with how some of the missions department staff handled things. We also didn't like how the music and service were pretty predictable. We loved the pastor and the people though. However... we felt we needed to make a change to branch out to experience what else God had in store for us. Now, praise God we're in a new season of life (personal communication by e-mail, June 10, 2013).

About what he meant by now being in "a new season of life", Delta said it means a re-discovering of God's grace and shedding some of the legalistic teachings he grew up with. That has to do with his involvement with Worthy Christian Forums and his online religious/faith experiences. It relates to the third research question as to what extent is the use of the Internet substituting for traditional church experience. When asked what moved him toward the online forums for religious/faith purposes, he said he wanted to reach out to others. He wanted to get other biblical perspectives than the ones he had in church.

Joining a Christian, non-denominational site that had the same values as I did was a wonderful addition to my walk with Christ. I now connect with Believers all over the world. It has also been good to get different perspectives as there is a wide variety of Believers from various denominations represented at Worthy. Sometimes I've found it's important to understand that certain non-critical theological perspectives are not wrong simply different (personal communication by e-mail, June 5, 2013).

Delta wanted an online community where he could get plugged in, grow, and be a blessing to others, as he said to a question about the reason he choose WCF as the online site for his religious practices. He sees WCF as part of an online non-denominational community, where:

There is also Worthy Chat, Worthy News, Worthy Devotions (Blogs), Worthy Prayer Team, etc. There are Baptists, Assembly of God, Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Charismatic, Orthodox, Catholics, all represented on Worthy" (personal communication by e-mail, June 5, 2013).

By "plug in", mentioned in a prior answer, he meant the connections he got with some forum members and a place to learn more about the Bible and other Christian perspectives. He also liked the structure of the forums site and the environment of it. By explaining his statement about having found an online community where he could grow spiritually, he said that one of the main reasons why he stayed with WCF, was the focus on Biblical truth, since he identifies himself as a believer in *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture/Bible only), and the site doesn't promote extra-biblical teaching. It relates to the fourth research question, on how the online forum

participants are finding community in the virtual space. On the topic of growth, he listed some aspect and areas where he is experiencing spiritual growth on his online religious experiences in the forums:

One of the areas for example that I've personally grown through my experience at WCF is in learning from others how Scripture all flows together. Another area I've grown is learning that tithing is simply a starting point and that God loves a cheerful generous giver. A third area is in understanding that on the non-essentials to the Christian faith it okay to in-Christ agree to disagree. Finally, an area I've grown in is learning to give people grace, not read into what they're saying, and ask questions for clarification rather than jump to conclusions (personal communication by e-mail, June 5, 2013).

That relates to the second research question on what kinds of content the participants are looking in the online forums, which in Delta's case shows that he has been growing spiritually in his faith on those contents and aspects he listed above. When asked what is the significance for him in participating on these forums, ha said he is "learning together with other believers around the world God's Word, pointing people to Christ, learning patience along the way, and being taught about God's grace. This has been a wonderful, stretching experience" (personal communication by e-mail, June 5, 2013).

When asked about the difference between his traditional (offline) church/spiritual experiences with the online experience, he pointed to the benefit of fellowship in the offline church with like-minded believers through worship, Bible study, and prayer, as being a wonderful experience in growing closer to Christ. At the

same time he says that there are connections online “through worship, prayer, and Bible study as well. The difference between the two is that online nobody is prejudged by physical appearance, intellectual prowess, social status, or status in the church...we truly are all equal at the foot of the cross” (personal communication by e-mail, June 5, 2013). When asked if the religious Christian “online environment” is free of judgment, he said that sometimes there are personality conflicts, other times there are doctrinal conflicts, but they try to foster an environment of respect in the forums.

By comparing church experiences with online experiences, Delta pointed to positive experiences in both places, at church and online, saying that “online there are connections through worship, prayer, and Bible study as well (as in the church). There are three aspects of Christian faith practices mentioned, as worship, prayer, and Bible study, and Delta explains how he sees that happen online:

Worship of God occurs in studying God’s Word together, through shared music as there’s a forum for that, and prayer/praise together. There is a forum designated specifically for prayer and praises. People from all over the world pray for each other. Bible study occurs as various topics/threads are discussed (personal communication by e-mail, June 10, 2013).

To a question about comparing his faith practices experiences at the offline church, in a physical place/setting, with a “virtual place” on the Internet, he said that both places have a purpose and are valid. “I believe that both are testimonies towards God’s grace and love. My local church family for the most part are all Believers with

similar values. While the online community is very diverse both culturally and doctrinally” (personal communication by e-mail, June 10, 2013). That relates to the fifth research question, on what is the internet as a virtual religious experience doing to the concept of place (sanctuary/temple) and church on the person’s spiritual/religious experience.

On looking into his online religious experience, Delta was asked what is virtual doing to his spiritual/religious experience differently than from his traditional offline church experience. He said that online he can discuss issues/topics with people from a wide variety of backgrounds, values, and doctrinal stances. He likes that there is no obligation to respond immediately to posters, while there is time to do research before responding. There is also a record of who said what on the forums, while in the church there is not. He perceives that there is an environment that fosters learning, growing, and sharing life together.

When asked from his online experience how a “virtual environment” fosters learning, growing, and sharing life together, he said it happens within a community atmosphere, digging into God’s Word, and praying together, which relates to the fourth research question on how the online forum participants are finding community in the virtual space. Based on that, when asked how and in what dimension the online virtual interactions and experiences have affected his faith in life, he said that “it has helped me understand God’s grace better. I’ve also learned that just because I

disagree with someone doesn't mean I can't have fellowship with them... It has also helped me understand when to be strict and when to be gracious" (personal communication by e-mail, June 14, 2013). Delta shows he is living his "new season of life" by practicing his faith online in the forums.

Participant Epsilon

Epsilon is a young adult who has been very active on Christian Worthy Forums (CWF) for over two years, and made it "my home" as he said when I asked him about the time he was involved with online religious forums. About his church experiences, he said that currently he is not a church member, but he goes to church and has attended churches since his childhood. He enjoyed his experiences at church. For that he says:

I am deeply grateful because I know many who have not had good experiences and it in the end puts a divider in-between their later church involvement... I attended two churches... Both were fantastic experiences and I deeply loved everyone I met there... The church I attend now is phenomenal and I am always encouraged by the time I leave there, it is a true blessing (personal communication by e-mail, June 10, 2013).

When asked why he got involved in online Christian forums, he said he was looking for spiritual guide and support, and also shared a personal conflicting situation in his home related to his parents' relationship, feeling loneliness and isolation. "I came to Worthy (WCF) mostly as a social outcast. I didn't have many friends so my social life was a bit deceased" (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013). The

lack of social relationships and community involvement, as well as conflicts in home among the parents, made him look for a place where he could find it:

I also needed some people in my life that cared about me. (Godly people) My parents fought a lot and I needed some sense of security that I couldn't find anywhere. It was my reaching out. Along with that I was weak in faith and needed stability and redirection (personal communication by e-mail, June 10, 2013).

Epsilon mentioned that at WCF he found a home, and why he considered it a home, pointing to some specific aspects he valued.

I genuinely felt (and still feel) that the people at worthy (WCF) for the most part are "real". Or as some say, transparent. They have real problems, with real needs and come to each other for help. That sense of realism is hard to find. It becomes more about being there for one another, than to be the "greater than you" type of thing. I needed and still need, that sense of no judgment, just love- and I find it at worthy (WCF) (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

Epsilon has a clear sense of community, with real feelings of being connected to the forum members. Also he feels being "at home" online, where he found people with problems and needs coming together to help each other, while in his real home that was not happening. He values the "being there for each other" with humility, and not being judgmental, but acting in love, because he needed that, and found it at the online forums. When asked what he meant by "sense of security" he found online, he referred to care and love he found at WCF.

Following his answer, he was asked what he meant by saying that the people at worthy (for the most part) are "real", and how he perceives the "real people" on a virtual space or "community". He said he defines "real people" those who are transparent with their problems and with themselves. They are also not afraid of who they were and where they are now in their life. That means who they were before being with Christ now, showing their real problems and not being afraid to share their struggles.

Another reason for joining the online forums was related to his home environment:

My parents clashed a lot and had a shaky marriage for many years... My dad worked most of the time to hide his pain and to support the family. Hardly saw them, and when I did, they were locked away in the bedroom arguing. My sisters were off doing their own thing so it left me little to do and talk about. Which is a big portion of my arrival to WCF (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013).

On a question about the significance for participating on the religious online forum, Epsilon revealed that he is a learner of the Bible with many "old timers" forum members that have "delved into the Word" and have actively been believers with Christian faith experiences and knowledge. He refers to always learning about the Bible through his participation on the forums, been encourage in his faith, and see things from different perspectives.

When asked what is different online from his traditional church experience, he pointed to the benefits of a physical face-to-face relationship in a church setting.

I think there will always be that greater experience when it comes to actually being in the church. You need that touch, that face and the meeting of eyes, it gives credence to the sincerity of the individual that for obvious reasons cannot be met through a computer screen. It is very easy to masquerade yourself behind a screen and eloquently describe something and make yourself seem or appeal to be something that is to the contrary. I find being in the actual place with people face to face more real time and realistic (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

That relates to the fourth research question on how the online religious practices compare with the traditional offline church practices, as well as it relates to the fifth research question, on What is the Internet as a virtual religious experience doing to the concept of place (sanctuary, temple) and church in relation to the person's spiritual/religious experience.

Epsilon shows that he found online a place where people care about each other, which he already identified as "home", contrasting with his physical home where he doesn't find that care, especially regarding to his faith. He also mentioned he is always learning something new in the online forums, so he was asked what kind of content he is learning. He pointed to the topics of the Gospel, God, his nature, and his promises. That relates to my second research question on what kind of content are the participants looking for on the online forums.

To the question asking for him to compare his religious experiences in a offline church setting, like a sanctuary or temple, with his online experiences, he said:

I find the church setting more spiritual then I do on the forum setting. There is something about actually "being there" in comparison to sitting in front of a computer. Being there, offers something that being in front of the computer cannot. That "something" is not only face to face fellowship, but an actual time to go heart to heart with other people (personal communication by e-mail, June 10, 2013).

Epsilon's view on the traditional offline church setting as a place compared to his online experience, relates also to the fifth research question, on how the online religious virtual practices in the forums is compared with the traditional church practices in a sanctuary or temple setting. At the same time, it is at online that he is getting support for his spiritual life and having active relationships with a Christian community, since he doesn't have relationships in the community where he lives. To a question what he means by saying in a previous answer that: "I came to Worthy (WCF) with a lot of issues and doubts about a lot of things- and they have really helped me in those areas", he said:

I came to Worthy mostly as a social outcast. I didn't have many friends so my social life was a bit deceased. I surfed the net, looking for a place to hang out- that's when I stumbled across Worthy. From then, I kind of made my home here. But mostly, I ignorantly thought I was lead here on a whim to help others. I thought I had all these things to offer with little to take in. This was pride 101 (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013).

As he described his online experience in the forums, he first had some clashes with people there, especially with moderators, saying that he basically “put them through hell for lack of a better reference”. He wonders today, why they didn’t ban him from the site at that time, while later he realized they were trying to help him. Reflecting on his experience he said:

I lead into someone that I wasn't. A person who was doubtless, blameless, upright, etc. During this time, I had a lot of false ideology. I spent most of my time reading online interpretations of the Bible, rather than being lead by God. A quick fix of sorts. Wanted the "knowledge" at little cost and little thought-which the knowledge I thought I had obtained obviously was not wisdom at all, but as I said earlier, false ideology (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013).

What Epsilon describes relates to the first research question, on how and in what ways the use of the Internet affects the participants’ religious experiences in online forums. In Epsilon’s statements there are four issues being related to his religious practices online. First, he shows how that his self-righteousness was impacted by what he learned from the forum discussions; second, he read documents and got biblical interpretation, which he labels as “ideology” (he explained later that he meant biblical issues); third, he discovered he was not being “led by God”; and fourth, he makes a differentiation between knowledge and wisdom.

There is a mix of issues involved in his experience at the forums, which may relate to his young age. While he was struggling with those issues, he was also getting

answers online to his spiritual questions and doubts: “I doubted mostly why God had done things the way He had. Why He was ‘absent’ and why He hadn't revealed Himself to me etc. This was a long roller coaster that wasn't settled until 2012, or last year rather” (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013).

About a question on how has the online spiritual experience affected his relationships with friends, family members, classmates, and with people in church, Epsilon answered that it has affected him in some ways, but not overall. And talking about what has been the impact of his online experience in the forums on his biblical/doctrinal knowledge about God, faith, sin, salvation, baptism, and other Christian doctrines, he said that he realized there was much more about faith, love, and ministry that he had not had a good grasp of, before coming to the online forums. He mentions leaning about the Old Testament, the prophets, particularly about Israel as a country, the New Testament, teachings of Christ and what it means.

When asked if his online experience has changed his concept of church, he said yes, mainly “about what is expected biblically in a church”, especially the role of leadership, which shows an unclear personal view about a historic concept of the Christian church. And when asked if his online experience and activity “substitutes” for the church, he said:

Not at all. I attend church weekly. This is mainly a hang out place. I mean, it of course serves as a fellowship purpose. But it does in no way substitute for my

church as I said before. Being in a place vs. in front of a computer are worlds apart (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013).

Epsilon's responses for the two questions above, relate to the third research question, on how and to what extent the online experience in the forums is substituting for or supplementing the traditional church experience. He brings to this study a view and experiences from a young adult, engaged on online faith practices.

Participant Zeta

I had a different experience on the interviews with Zeta, compared with the other participants in this study. She is very active at Worthy Christian Forums (WCF) with over 25,000 posts. She has been involved with the online forums for 8 years, and does not attend an offline church. The difference I mentioned compared to the other interviewees is her short straight answers to my questions. Most of her answers were shorter than my questions, but expressing specifically her experiences, views and thoughts. Before joining WCF she had a short time of church membership, just about a year, and to a question about how was her offline church membership experience, she just said it was very spotty.

Considering that Zeta is very active on the online Christian forums, with 8 years of participation, and only one year being a church member, with a "very spotty" attendance, she was asked to explain how she developed her Christian faith/beliefs/

Bible knowledge, and how much of that was developed in the one year of offline church attendance, and she said:

I have always been a believer, although not as strong in those beliefs as I am now, so I can't pinpoint how I came to believe. My knowledge of the Bible comes from the forum, no doubt. My church attendance did little for me but I believe that was because it simply wasn't the right church (personal communication by e-mail, June 12, 2013).

To a question on why did she get involved in online Christian forums, she said it was due to lack of interaction with other Christians in the real world, meaning the church setting. Following her answer to this question, she was asked if the lack of interaction with other Christians she mentioned was at a personal, doctrinal, or spiritual area, and she said that, "my lack of interaction with other believers came about simply from associating with the wrong people. And it was in ALL areas of my life" (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013). Her emphasis on "ALL" areas of relationships shows it is difficult for her to establish personal relationships in a group of people, in this case the church community. The social environment she found at the church didn't work positively for her inclusion, and when asked what was she expecting by participating in an offline church, which she didn't get, she said it was a sense of fellowship, which didn't happen.

A reason Zeta mentioned to get involved in online forums was a "lack of interaction in the real world". So she was asked if the online interaction is done in an

“unreal world”, and she said that it is not, and that it actually happens online in a very real world to her, an online world populated with strong believers. It relates to the sixth research question on how interactivity affects the online religious practices in the forums. To a question on what made her stay with WCF and what made her be such an active member she said:

I stayed with Worthy because it's a good 'fit' for me. I love interacting with those who are like me and also those who are different, such as nonbelievers and even some Muslims and Wiccans. I am active because I can post on the forum from work or from home; being short on time is the number one reason for that (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

Zeta reveals a love for interaction not only with people that are like her, but also with the ones that are different, but doing that online, on a cyberspace, while her experience in “the real world”, as she mentioned early, doesn’t work well regarding her relationships. And about the significance in participating on the forums, she said:

My participation in this forum has brought about changes in me.... good ones. Interacting with other Christians has taught me a lot because some of our members are light years ahead of me in knowledge. It also prompts me to pray for others more than I would ever think to do on my own (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

As she mentioned that the online experience has brought some good changes for her, she was asked how these changes relate to her spiritual life with God and her life at all, and she said that “I've learned patience, forgiveness and empathy from Worthy members and moderators. I've come to understand that I can do nothing

without Him and I've grown more forgiving toward everyone in my life" (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013). It relates clearly to my first framing research question on how and in what ways the Internet affects the participants' religious experiences in online forums.

Even considering Zeta's short time church attendance, she was asked about the difference between her traditional former offline church experience and the online experience. She said that the only difference is that she cannot see or hear her fellow believers on the forums. As a faith experience, she doesn't see a difference in her online practice, compared with a traditional church practice, and when I asked if something was lacking in her spiritual online experience/activity, she said that nothing was lacking. That answer indicated that Zeta's faith experiences online were fulfilling her spiritual needs on the Internet, so that it could be understood that she may have substituted for the traditional church practice by the online forums. But when asked specifically if there has been that substitution, she said that it didn't really happen.

Zeta didn't find a sense of fellowship in the offline church. "To be truthful, I only talked to three people out of the 500 members when I was attending my last church" (personal communication by e-mail, June 19, 2013). So she was asked if she found it on the Internet, in the forums. She said that yes, she feels a sense of fellowship with the other members of WCF, although it's not a strong sense of fellowship, while she seldom if ever engage in community activities. Following her

answer about the sense of fellowship, she was asked to identify what would be needed for her to feel stronger sense of fellowship online, and she said that “not really. There is only so far you can go online but I DO feel connected to the other members of Worthy (WCF)” (personal communication by e-mail, June 19, 2013).

She realizes the reality of fellowship established online, but she also sees a limit on its dimension. At the same time she experiences more fellowship in the online forums than at the church. By emphasizing “I DO feel connected”, she expresses a clear and strong feeling of fellowship she has online, with the forum members, which relates to the fourth research question on how the online forum participants are finding community in the virtual space. About social relationships, she said that the online experience has not changed her social relationships, which she considers “totally separate”. On a question if she had built personal/virtual relationships online, she said it hasn’t happened.

The topic about community came back when asked how and in what dimension the virtual interaction and experience has affected her faith in life. Zeta said it has not affected, and that her faith has always been strong, but when asked what is virtual doing to her spiritual/religious experience, she said that “my experiences online have made me a stronger believer and the people I interact with, from all over the world, have taught me a lot. I can also fellowship with them all day, every day, instead of just on Sunday” (personal communication by e-mail, June 19, 2013).

In a church setting as a sanctuary, temple, or worship place, there is the presence of people, a face-to-face communication environment, and a sense of a physical community, with music, songs, visual impact, etc. So she was asked if that spiritual experience would be the same as her online spiritual experience, and she said: “No, it's completely different but I'm okay with not having that. Too much closeness makes me want to go” (personal communication by e-mail, June 19, 2013). She also mentioned that her online practice/experience has not changed her concept of church, while she has a lack of desire for organized worship. It points to the third research question, to what extent is the use of the Internet substituting for traditional (offline) church experience.

By comparing Zeta's spiritual experience in a traditional church setting, like a sanctuary or temple, with her virtual online experience in the forums, she said that her online experience and what she learned are just as important as going to church, which shows she uses the online faith or spiritual practice as her church experience or activity. When asked what has been the impact of the online forums experience on her biblical/doctrinal knowledge about God, faith, sin, salvation, baptism, or other Christian doctrines, she said that “due to the high number so VERY knowledgeable people online, I have become way more knowledgeable myself” (personal communication by e-mail, July 4, 2013).

Regarding content, she mentioned as her preferred topics, Faith vs. Science, Prophecy, U.S. Politics and General Discussion, with a special interest on political topics, while she stays logged on all the time. That relates to the second research question, on what kinds of content are the participants looking in the online forums. Considering being part of WCF for so many years, she was asked how she would describe her experience as a member of an “online community”, and how that community developed, changed, or moved, and she said: “I've learned a lot as part of this 'community'. It HAS changed over the years. New perspectives and ideologies have moved Worthy (WCF) away from the extreme right wing views” (personal communication by e-mail, July 4, 2013).

Zeta’s active participation on the online forums and her short answers to questions, seemed to show a paradox, but at the same time, through her answers, it’s possible to perceive that she avoids personal social relationships, which moved her to online forums for her spiritual/faith practices, since it is by nature or tradition a practice done in a community environment at the offline church.

Participant Eta

Eta is an interesting online religious practitioner, with many thousands of posts on Worthy Christian Forums (WCF), in his 70s, and being online on Christian forums:

For at least seventeen (17) years I’ve had the joy of worldwide Internet fellowship... and today because of the online religion discussion groups (forums) and without any traditional church support, I (an infirmed believer) no

longer remain a worship and fellowship shut-in (personal communication by e-mail, May 30, 2013).

He had never been a church “voting member”, although he has attended and supported different churches throughout his life. By being in the Navy, he attended different churches across the nation, like Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist, Seven Days Adventist, and Calvary Chapel. He mentioned that some he left and by some he “shunned away from,” as being a smoker at the time. Through his answers to the questions and his posts on the forums, he shows a strong biblical knowledge, by using numerous Bible text in his online interactions.

By answering a question about joining and being at WCF for the last 9 years, he mentioned that it related initially to his concern about the persecution and salvation (according the Christian faith) of the Jewish people, which connected him to the site which is based in Israel. So he was asked why his specific concerns with Jews and with Israel, and he said that it was very personal: “My father and my uncles fought (and some died) to stop the Jew hating Nazis; and my God and my LORD is a Jew and the KING OF THE JEWS, and I love them so” (personal communication by e-mail, July 4, 2013). What made him stay at WCF has been “the love, the Word (Bible), and the world wide mission field. About his online religious activities he says:

I am old and in ill health so my church attendance is now limited to the www. I have more podcasts downloaded than I have time to hear, and until my eyesight and hearing goes, I can choose between preachers and discussion

boards, and I am blessed... I am a seventy year old fellow” (personal communication by e-mail, May 30, 2013).

Eta’s statement shows how the Internet is replacing his traditional church experience due to his age, health, and personal circumstances. It relates to the third research question, on to what extent is the use of the Internet substituting for traditional church experience. That’s a situation which is not common today, where possibly most of the elderly are not acquainted with the use of social media, especially for religious purposes. He is showing a new perspective for the elderly community regarding to their faith practices.

About his church relation/participation, Eta shows that although he didn’t belong formally to a church as a “voting member”, he had varied experience on attending different churches. Also he shows a consistent knowledge of the Bible, by using its quotes in all his responses, as well as in his posts. Based on that, he was asked how much of his Bible knowledge came from church participation experiences, and how much came from his online experiences. He said that most of it came from preachers and teachers at churches:

I have been blessed beyond measure. As a youth I had great aunts and Sunday School teachers who used the KJV (King James Bible version) as my basic reading primer. And although I wandered from seeking Jesus, God in his mercy still spoke to me from the word planted deep within my heart. And many, many teachers and preachers from most Christian denominations have taught me God’s word. And daily I thank God for their faithfulness (personal communication by e-mail, June 4, 2013).

About that church learning experience he said: “I learned to pour my heart out to the Lord before the world, and to freely give back the word I’ve received; and to rejoice with the rejoicing, and to weep for the lost and with the hurting” (personal communication by e-mail, June 4, 2013).

Being online today for his religious/faith practices, besides posting on the forums, Eta is actively downloading and hearing Podcasts. To a question about the sources of those Podcast and its doctrinal basis, he listed 13 different sources, like Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, The Decker Report, El Shaddai Ministry, Passion for Truth Ministries, Understanding the Times, and others. That relates to the second research question, about what kinds of content are the participants looking in the online forums. And when asked what is the significance for him in participating on the online forums, he said it is the “the joy of communing worldwide with Jesus and with those Royal kids, my siblings, talking Jesus all day long” (personal communication by e-mail, June 4, 2013).

On a question about the difference in Eta’s traditional offline church/spiritual experience from the online experience, he described his experience in church as being passive, while on the Internet it is mostly active. At the church, many sit and don’t take an active action in the ministry, while online the participation is active. When asked how he compares his spiritual experience in a traditional church setting (in a sanctuary

or temple) with his virtual online experience in the forums, he said that there is no difference. And about what is the online virtual spiritual activity doing to his religious experience, he said he is being blessed by the online experience.

On a question how he compares his spiritual experience in a traditional offline church setting (in a sanctuary or temple) with his virtual online experience in the discussion forums, he mentioned that both experiences “are great. The virtual experience is immediate and personal in that every word posted may come under the sharp scrutiny and correction by believers or even mockery by trolling unbelievers” (personal communication by e-mail, June 4, 2013). And by comparing the experience being in a “physical offline church” with being in a “church online”, he said:

The potlucks are better at the physical church... the brick and mortar church for the traditional church meets at set times in set places, with saints (members) usually coming together from just one neighborhood... So at my age and depending on my health, I may seldom if ever join with the physical church... The body of Christ (the church) online meets at any time on any day and from any country on earth. Whenever I am able to I can sit at my computer and come together in fellowship and learning with the online saints – meaning Christian fellows (personal communication by e-mail, July 5, 2013).

To a question on what is virtual or the online spiritual activity doing to Eta’s spiritual/religious experience, he said that daily it sets Jesus at the center of his thoughts and the Christian brotherhood at the center of his prayers; and on how his faith has being impacted/changed by the Internet online activity, he said that the fellowship with believers and the active witness for Christ on the Internet has helped

him to keep Jesus at the forefront of his mind. That relates to the fifth research question, on what is the Internet as a virtual religious experience doing to the concept of place (sanctuary or temple) and church on the person's spiritual/religious experience.

Looking for the impact the online experience has on Eta's Christian faith, he was asked how and in what dimension the virtual interaction and experience has affected his faith in life. He answered saying:

The mixture of youth and oldsters with their cut and parry over scriptural understandings is a great joy in my old age. The seriousness of coming alongside the believer in prayer at any time of the day or night as he or she endures trials and hardships is an unexpected gift from the Lord. This twenty-four hour a day never happened in my "brick and mortar" church days (personal communication by e-mail, July 5, 2013).

Eta talked about how the virtual spiritual experience has affected his social and church relationships, when he moved from his hometown and state to another far place, leaving behind his friends and offline church fellows. Most of those relationships "came out of the brick and mortar church". His age and health condition are being a factor in his social relationship in the place he moved to. So his online activity has established a new community and social relations for him. It relates to the fourth research question, on how the online forum participants are finding community in the virtual space. Eta says:

The virtual spiritual experiences have reopened fellowship up once again.

The net has opened up new church relationships both worldwide and at home (U.S.) at any time of the day or night. Our giving (my wife and I) is now directed to ministries online...the www social connection sites... are becoming huge gathering places for older folk as they grow more and more physically feeble. For folk whose heart sings to the King of kings (Jesus), Christian sites such as Worthy (WCF) are an answer to prayers (personal communication by e-mail, July 5, 2013).

Eta brings to this study an input from a senior perspective of how the new technologies and the social media can be part of a spiritual practice and need of an elderly community that may be “forgotten” by their families, their Christian churches, and their communities, regarding an online reality and opportunity for them to engage in their social and spiritual/faith practices.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Conclusion

Personal Introductory Note

My academic background in theology and communication, as well as my academic and ministerial Christian experience are intrinsically related to this case study, from the definition of the topic to the final academic work. The purpose of this introductory note about my background relates to the perspective of my analysis. I was not a participant observer, but due my life experience in the field of religion and communication, I could better understand and perceive the participants' experiences regarding their offline churches.

Religion and communication have always been part of my religious professional activity, from the beginning of my ministry experience in Brazil, with radio programs, a TV program, and within the printing field. Seeking a journalism degree besides my theological education in Brazil, opened my eyes to the exciting academic field of communication and its pervasiveness in society by shaping culture, and affecting religion. A master's degree in Media communication at Webster University, Saint Louis, MO, deepened my interest and vision about a new challenge the Christian church was facing in relation to the field of communication. The development of new communication technologies and particularly the Internet became quickly a new

challenge for the Christian church and its mission, as it happened in the previous stages of communication technologies development, starting with the printing press.

While teaching communication at Concordia University Texas and seeking a terminal degree, I was accepted into the doctoral program at the University of Texas Austin (UT), in 2004. The subject of digital media and religion online caught my attention as a new development in communication that would be of importance to the Christian church, as the prior stages of communication technologies were in the past. By sharing some personal information, I am showing a strict relationship between the theoretical academic work, and my ministry in the Christian church.

In relation to the academic work at the University of Texas, besides participating at AEJMC conferences and other academic activities, I had the opportunity and privilege to meet some of the best scholars in the field of religion online, from Europe, North America, and beyond, who are leading the research and studies of online/digital religion today, as the founding members of the *International Society for Media, Religion, and Culture (ISMRC)*. Related to the ISMRC is the *Center for Media, Religion, and Culture*, at the University of Colorado at Boulder, directed by Stewart Hoover, which serves as the global secretariat for biennial international conferences on Media, Religion, and Culture. I attended three of those conferences: in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2004; in Sigtuna, Sweden, in 2006; and in São Paulo, Brazil, in

2008. So my academic and church experiences are an integral part of the data analysis.

Throughout this study, my personal beliefs and church affiliation are not used to make judgments or to influence participants in the interview process, and neither I am subscribing to (or critiquing) their doctrinal concepts and spiritual practices, but bringing them up to an academic analysis as I perceived it from their responses. Also as mentioned in this study, I am using the term *offline church* to identify the traditional denominational church, as it is being widely used in the updated literature of *online religion* or *digital religion*.

Summary on Findings about Research Questions

In this chapter I am discussing findings from my six research questions, starting with the first one, a general framing question for this case study, followed by a summary review of the application of the most relevant theories and conclusions.

Research Question 1

RQ1: How and in what ways does the Internet affect the participants' religious experiences in online forums?

The traditional Christian religious experiences have been and continue to be happening in the physical church, as a primary place of religious/faith practices and activities. As a general framing question for this case study (Research Question 1), I

was looking for answers to *how and in what ways does the Internet affect the participants' religious experiences in online forums*.

The group of people I interviewed and observed online in their posts showed themselves to be a good base for beginning to answer this question, since they were actively involved in practicing their faith online, with each of them having thousands of posts on the forums in the online group I was examining, in Worthy Christian Forum. They come from traditional Christian churches' experiences and practices, where basically their biblical doctrinal knowledge was formed, and where they had disappointments and conflicts as members of those communities of faith. They are mostly not connected to or practicing their faith in a traditional church anymore, but only on the Internet.

The participants in this study showed that there is a discovery of a new spiritual faith engagement experience in a virtual way or "place" on the Internet, by entering the online forums. The new media opened a new window for social interactions and practices, including religious/faith practices, as Stewart Hoover states: "In the digital age, adherents, audiences, listeners, communities of shared practices and shared memory, and various 'publics' are now active in production, circulation, imbrications, selection, and re-making of 'the religious' and 'the spiritual'." (2012:xii). Their online faith or spiritual experiences online are meaningful to them, and are affecting and being part of their lives. Having "a new season of life" by moving from the offline

church to online, means for a participant of this study a re-discovering of God's grace and shedding some of the legalistic teachings he/she grew up with.

Relevant to research question 4, about finding religious community online, a strong sense of community is perceived by the online forum participants, not only as a social community, but especially as a community of faith, with its unique concept, being a virtual community and not bound by a common set of doctrines, in this case, Christian doctrines. It supports what Heidi Campbell defines as an online community:

An online community is a product of an information-driven culture providing a forum to sustain and connect individuals who would otherwise be distanced due to geography, lifestyle, or other limitations. It is a new social grouping, created as people invest emotionally in relationships formed online. The characteristics of online relationships – being self-directed, nonphysical, and allowing anonymity – make online community both unique and complex” (Campbell, 2005, p. 50).

Campbell's definition matches with the perception of community revealed by the participants in this study. They have a strong sense of community, clearly self-directed by their own views, principles, life experiences, faith beliefs and practices. They also settle in a non-physical relationship, not advancing into a personal, face to face or physical relationship as in a traditional social community of faith, while in general keeping their anonymity through their usernames on the online forums.

As participant Zeta acknowledges, “my participation in these forums has brought about changes in me.... good ones. Interacting with other Christians has

taught me a lot... It also prompts me to pray for others more than I would ever think to do on my own.” About the good changes her online experience in the forums brought to her, she said: “I've learned patience, forgiveness and empathy from Worthy (Worthy Christian Forums) members and moderators. I've come to understand that I can do nothing without Him and I've grown more forgiving toward everyone in my life,” which shows how and in what ways the Internet affects the participants’ religious experiences in online forums.

By following my research questions, I will summarize my discussion and draw some conclusions on how this group of Christians aids their faith in forum groups, considering this as a case study in the larger question of how religion, like many social phenomena, is moving online. Within the first general framing question of the study, on how and in what ways does the Internet affect the participants’ religious experiences in online forums, aspects of virtual community, social relationships, biblical growth, strength of faith, and others will be discussed through the analysis of the data related to the other five research questions.

Research Question 2

RQ2: What kinds of content are the participants looking in the online forums?

The participants in this study, as mentioned above, mostly left their churches to be active in online Christian forums, changing their traditional offline community of faith for an online community, for their spiritual experiences and practices. My second

research question is about *what kind of contents the participants are looking in the online forums*. Among different factors involved in leaving their churches to look for religious life online, there is one common one, related to spiritual biblical knowledge and growth.

As participant Alpha mentioned, he was looking “for more than what was being provided through the churches I had been visiting. Even though I was active in a few programs they had, I was not being fed the Word and I craved for a deeper understanding, a closer walk with Christ”. A lack of faith nourishment is being now fulfilled online by a deeper understanding of the Bible, while online interaction and forums offer “a wider degree of biblical knowledge and cultural information about what is going on in other parts of the world by those who live there”, he says. That raises an interesting implication of the online ability to meet and interact with people that these participants would not have met in regular face-to-face church experience.

The experience opens unlimited possibilities of sources for biblical studies and faith nurturance on access to Bible Concordances with different Bible versions; online interlinear Bible (English and Greek or Hebrew original texts), as well as Bible dictionaries and other theological resources. It resonates with changing patterns of study and access where theology is open for people to participate in, to adapt it to their particular situations, and also to make their contribution through their online interaction (Horsfield, 2012).

A place to discuss biblical issues outside the church is what participant Gamma mentioned, which he sees as helping him to “reduce dogma and to understand that my opinion is just an opinion,” which reinforces the aspect of the theology being open and adapted to a particular view or situation. With another perspective, participant Epsilon is looking to the forums as a place where he is always learning something about the Bible, with many “old timer” forum members that have “delted into the Word” and have actively been believers with Christian faith experiences and knowledge.

Spiritual growth is what participant Delta looks for in the forums, by “learning from others how Scripture all flows together...from other believers around the world...as a wonderful stretching experience” The perception of growth here relates to a faith experience compared with his past church experiences. In the same way, participant Zeta pointed to her experience of finding biblical knowledge by interacting online with others in the forums, “due to the high number so VERY knowledgeable people online, I have become way more knowledgeable myself (upper case by respondent)”. Her favorite topics are Faith vs. Science, Prophecy, plus a special interest in U.S. political topics, while she is “logged on all the time.”

Participant Eta shows a new reality of a senior who today is having his whole religious/faith practice online. He downloads a variety of Christian content, in different formats, from different sources for his biblical knowledge and spiritual growth, since

he is not able to attend a church. At the same time he shares the biblical content he gets, through an active participation and posting on the forums, which shows another aspect of the religious practices online.

Finding answers to spiritual questions in the Christian forums is part of what participant Beta values in her experience online. It helped her with answers “throughout the years...with stories, scriptures, advice, prayer, and love”. It also showed that people are finding interpersonal and spiritual support online. Her posts on a board show a time when she was going through a terrible situation in life. In a desperate post she literally “begged for help.” An instant impressive reaction came from all over, through prayers, Bible texts and messages, and words of encouragement.

Research Question 3

RQ3: To what extent is the use of the Internet substituting for traditional church experience?

The relationship between the traditional church identified as offline church, and the online religious/faith practices, has been invariably present in the studies of online religion. On looking into the findings to my question on to what extent the use of the Internet is substituting for traditional church experience, we need to consider some basic aspects of an online and offline church, which has been extensively addressed in studies in the last decade, comparing online religious practices with

offline church practices (Campbell 2001, 2004, 2005, 2010, 2013; Dawson and Cowan 2004; Young 2004; Hutchings 2012; Lundby 2012; Lövheim 2013). The studies point to the clear existence of religious practices online, but still discuss if there is a real substantial virtual substitute to the traditional/offline church in cyberspace.

Since the Internet became an interpersonal medium and rapidly developed into a social medium, the scholars cited above and others developed studies focused on religion online and/or online religion. The studies cover the topics from the first religious communities online to religion in Cyberspace, and related topics, like cyberfaith, ritual and virtual community, identity, authority, and others. There is one common topic that has been deeply been discussed is about online or virtual community. In "Exploring Religious Communities Online: We Are One in the Network," a key study on online community, Heidi Campbell (2004) identified "desired relational qualities found in online community, such as emotional intimacy, trust, honesty, and openness" (p.170), from which rose a question on the same study if an online community could become a substitute to an offline community. As mentioned above, studies pointed to the existence of online communities, mostly as a complement to the offline community, while the participants still were attending their traditional or offline churches as their community of faith.

When questioned about the experience online being a substitute for their offline church experience, the participants in this study pointed to a parallel between

the online and offline church experiences, justifying their option for being mostly solely online today. In doing that, the qualities of online and offline groups found by Bayam regarding community, appeared in their answers, by mentioning aspects of “sense of space, shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities, and interpersonal relations” (Bayam, 2010:75). Christian faith practices are rooted in a community action experience, so when comparing an offline church experience with an online faith practice, the element of community and social relations appears. There seems to be a challenge for these participants to clearly define and compare an offline church with an online church experience.

Participant Alpha left an offline church and has been practicing his faith online for the last 6 years. He found a live and dynamic environment of new relationships which through the forums’ interaction challenged him to grow in his faith and knowledge of the Bible, as well as being able to express it online, which he was not getting on his offline church. Most of his relationships were replaced by online relationships. Online he interacts with people from all over the world who “gather to discuss scripture, concerns, ask questions, encourage and pray for others.” He found others “with the same inner moving in their spirit to grow closer to the Lord, not just by words, but how they live...this may seem strange, but I feel closer to some members on Worthy than I had with some I knew in person” (personal communication by e-mail, May 24, 2013).

The comparison is also between the more constant and flexible opportunities offered by the offline church, the 24/7 opportunity the Internet offers for online religious practices, and the more time bound practices of offline churches. “We speak of scripture all the time, not just one or two days a week ... I can tell you that I have changed to a deeper understanding far more than I would of if I only met once a week...a deeper understanding of salvation, deeper understanding of how Christ works in and through us with the Holy Spirit” (personal communication by e-mail, June 11 and July 4, 2013).

Participant Beta left the offline church to be online. She has been on online chats and forums for 9 years, while for some time she had an active participation in two offline churches, but at this time, “the connection and discussion about God that I get online, is the only source of that in my life right now. If I didn't have it, then I wouldn't have any contact really with that side of my life” (personal communication by e-mail, June 23, 2013). In these interviews, I found a set of common reasons for people to leave their offline church to go online for their spiritual practices, due to personal disappointments, conflicts, relationships problems, and/or doctrinal disagreements, and other reasons.

In Beta's case, it was when college, life, pain, and church “wrecked” her. “I was so lost. I needed and still need some light on my path and Worthy (WCF) is a tangible beacon for me. I can ask questions, read research, pray with people, laugh, cry, share

my struggles and my truth with people” (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013). On describing the online forums as “being a refuge from the storm” she said: “Maybe it’s my generation? I view online as just as important as real world...Refuge is refuge no matter what it looks like or sounds like” (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013).

For participant Gamma, the aspect of anonymity appears when comparing the church experiences with his online religious experiences and to what extent is the offline church being substitute by his online experience. By having gone through struggles with past addictions, he praises the tolerance and acceptance online, which he didn’t get in any church he attended. But at the same time, he states that neither in his church affiliation or online, did he get the help he needed regarding sobriety, and mental/emotional stability, which actually are health issues/problems to be at first clinically treated. He got those only from Alcoholics Anonymous, in its face to face treatment programs. As anonymity is important for him, he also sees online communication as being susceptible to identity problems among the users.

For participant Eta, the Internet is replacing his offline church attendance due to his age, health, and personal circumstances, which do not permit him to physically attend church. “The virtual spiritual experiences have reopened fellowship up once again. The net has opened up new church relationships both worldwide and at home (U.S.) at any time of the day or night” (personal communication by e-mail, July 5,

2013). It shows a new perspective for the senior/elderly community acquainted with the social media regarding to their faith practices.

Participants of this study show some paradoxes by describing their experiences regarding the question about the online religious experience being a substitute to the offline church. One said, "Online sites cannot replace the closeness one gets from a local gathering of the saints... there is no replacing the personal love one can gain from true personal relationships with someone you can actually touch" (personal communication by e-mail, May 24, 2013). When going deeper into the question on substituting the offline church by the online religious experience, it gets very clear: "there will never be a replacement for a true one-on-one personal relationship. This is how God created us" (personal communication by e-mail, June 8, 2013).

But at the same time that the online religious experience is practiced and fulfilling the spiritual needs, there is an intimate need to be fulfilled by living the faith in a human physical community. "My online time does not replace the church at all. If anything, it increases the desire to find a local gathering where people follow scripture in its fullest, creating a deeper desire to find such a group. I find myself longing for the day when this will happen" (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

Research Question 4

RQ4: How are the online forum participants finding community in the virtual space? How does it compare to offline community for them?

Early concepts and discussions about a virtual community and its definition and/or reality became part of academic studies in the 1990s and at beginning of the 21st Century (Rheingold 1993; McLoughlin, Osborne, and Smith 1995; Smith and Kollock 1999; Dawson 2000), and evolved since then, following new media technologies. As the access to the Internet became more popular, and online communities in different forms were being built, studies have shown that most of the online religious practitioners were doing it as a complement to their offline church (Dawson 2004; Larsen 2004; Campbell 2005). As technology evolves on a fast pace and particularly new media technology, in the same way the use of it has a dynamic process and change.

“An online community is a product of an information-driven culture providing a forum to sustain and connect individuals who would otherwise be distanced due to geography, lifestyle, or other limitations. It is a new social grouping, created as people invest emotionally in relationships formed online. The characteristics of online relationships – being self-directed, nonphysical, and allowing anonymity – make online community both unique and complex” (Campbell, 2005, p. 50).

Participants in this study understand and feel they are being part of an online community. “Those online who are my brothers and sisters are just as much brothers and sisters as those in my community” (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013). There is a feeling of family relationship and care among them by sharing their problems, needs, challenges, successes, and hope. “I have found online people more

willing to encourage and strengthen then when face to face” (personal communication by e-mail, May 31, 2013)

Participant Delta found a community where he feels “plugged in”, and can grow spiritually, fostering learning, and sharing life together, digging into God’s Word, and praying together. On the other hand, Participant Zeta realizes the reality of fellowship established online, but also sees a limit on its dimension, while she experiences more fellowship in the online forums than at her former church. By emphasizing, “I DO feel connected”, she expresses a clear and strong feeling of fellowship she has online, with the forum members. As Heidi Campbell pointed:

Identifying desired relational qualities found in online community, such as emotional intimacy, trust, honesty, and openness, provides a general critique and redefining of the concept of community. When the Internet produces relationships described as more intimate than those in the church, the question must be asked: Could online community become a substitute for offline community?” (2005:170).

Research Question 5

RQ5: What is the Internet as a virtual religious experience doing to the concept of place (sanctuary/temple) and church on the person’s spiritual/religious experience?

As mentioned in chapter 4, in the data analysis, the Christian church place of worship is profoundly and historically connected to a temple or a sanctuary, as well as the place of the religious activities. Worship in the Christian tradition practice has been

a collective act and associated to a place, as shown in the Bible and throughout the history of the Christian church.

About the concept or meaning of a worship within the Christian church, Harper's Bible Dictionary states that "the earliest description of Christian worship is in Justin Martyr's First Apology, 65-67 (about A.D. 150): on Sunday all the believers meet together; the memoirs of the Apostles (the Gospels) and the writings of the prophets (the O.T.) are read; a sermon follows; the congregation prays audibly; the Eucharist is celebrated, including the prayer of consecration of the elements, and ending with the "Amen" of the congregation" (1973:828).

Participants in this study see as unnecessary "a human setting," like a temple or sanctuary, for spiritual experiences in the Christian faith. "Church is simply the body of Christ. It's not a building. It's not a location. It's a community. And whether that happens in a building or virtually doesn't seem like it should matter to me" (personal communication by e-mail, July 2, 2013).

When it comes to worship being considered an important aspect and practice of the Christian faith, and how that is being substituted online, participant Alpha says he has learned to worship God in everything, all day long, and that worship "does not have to be done within the confines of a building", and that "there is no substitute at all, just a different location. Worship is done from the heart and can be done anywhere... To be honest, I use to look forward going to church until I realized that I

can have church anywhere, anytime. To me, this is the true freedom I find in Christ” (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

For other participants, worship at the offline church and at their online experience that “it's definitely different... it's a different mind frame.... You can truly worship God online... Worship is not always singing, or hymns or even scripture” (Beta, personal communication by e-mail, June 16 & July 2, 2013). For Gamma, “I don't have a separate spiritual experience in church or online... My spiritual experience is dynamic in nature and does not follow a schedule or liturgy (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013). And for Zeta, “it’s completely different but I'm okay with not having that (offline church worship)” (personal communication by e-mail, June 19, 2013).

Participants’ concept of worship has a broader or different meaning than the traditional understanding of worship as a collective liturgical event in a place, as a temple, sanctuary or at an outside set prepared for it. Within the Christian church history, worship has been the center of its activities, congregating the believers as “a congregation”, the “community of saints” (meaning the members). Churches, temples, cathedrals were and still are located in privileged areas in the cities. There are personal meanings of worship being developed and expressed by participants. As editor William Biernatzki noted:

The Internet as an unrestricted field for self expression offers a tempting resource for people who want to “do their own thing” in religion. At the same

time, some may be attracted by the Internet's anonymity, giving them opportunities to explore the esoteric without risking peer criticism" (2006:19).

While the participants are primarily and basically restricting their religious activity online, they recognize the difference between worshipping in a church, with others Christian fellows as being unique. "There is nothing like worshipping with others in person. I cannot worship like this on the internet. There are no comparisons at all. This is where online loses its value" (personal communication by e-mail, June 8, 2013). While it is at online that he is getting support for his spiritual life and having active relationships with a Christian community, since he doesn't have relationships in the community where he lives, another participant says:

I find the church setting more spiritual then I do on the forum setting. There is something about actually "being there" in comparison to sitting in front of a computer. Being there, offers something that being in front of the computer cannot. That "something" is not only face to face fellowship, but an actual time to go heart to heart with other people (personal communication by e-mail, June 10, 2013).

In a church setting as a sanctuary, temple, or worship place, there is the presence of people, a face-to-face communication going on, a sense of community feeling, with music, songs, liturgy, visual impact, communion, and so for. That's what has being difficult for the participants to articulate and see transferred to their online religious experience. As one said, online "does not replace my real life encounters with other Christians... For me, though. I feel more connected mentally at a traditional

church than online (personal communication by e-mail, June 18 & 23, 2013). And also “there will never be a replacement for a true one-on-one personal relationship. This is how God created us” (personal communication by e-mail, June 8, 2013). It shows the paradoxical situation where there is no replacement of the offline church by the online faith practices, while the online practice is and continues to be the online.

Individual religious concepts and interpretations are probably more visible on the Internet than they are in other mass media. Patchwork patterns incorporating, transforming, and recognizing various religious elements within one single biography stand side by side with more “traditional” ways of constructing personal religiosity, which follow the dominant discourse of churches or established religious traditions (Miczek, 2012:219).

Research Question 6

RQ6: How does interactivity affect the online religious practices in the forums?

The Internet provides a virtual place for interactions between people from any place in the world, at any time, who have a common desire to share information, and in this case, their faith experiences. It’s “a place,” which Downes & McMillan (2000) consider on their participant-based dimensions of interactivity as the communication environment creates a sense of place, enabling all participants to actively communicate, as timing of communication is flexible to meet the time demands of the participants. By making the participants active actors in the process of communication and not part of a passive audience, the new media technology is enabling a personal interaction and control by participants in the whole communication process, now

more intensive with the development of the social networks (p. 107). That can be applied to the discussion forums in this study.

Participants of this study pointed to the relationship with others with whom they found a common bond and an opportunity to connect with, in a wider spectrum, and the aspect of readiness in communication and relationships as part of the reason to go online, comparing it with their offline church experiences. Online offers “a wider degree of biblical knowledge and cultural information about what is going on in other parts of the world by those who live there”.

Participants in religious forums say they connect with people from the entire world that are online 24/7 considering the different time zones where they live, as well some personal sleepiness situation, when “most people in ‘real life’ are asleep in the middle of the night. Chat rooms and online discussion groups give me an outlet for those times where I cannot access anyone physically in the real world” (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013). And “I can also fellowship with them all day, every day, instead of just on Sunday” (personal communication by e-mail, June 19, 2013).

On looking into interactivity on the online religious forums, and considering Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) versus face-to-face communication, participants show the benefits of communicating online, compared to a face-to-face communication. “I have found people are more willing to communicate online than

face to face, and that is what I was looking for” (personal communication by e-mail, May 31, 2013). Another participant, Beta, wrote:

I can type things that are far too hard or sad or triggering to talk about with my voice. My fingers open up a world of opportunity that is not hindered by fear of being heard by someone, by saying the wrong thing or someone I know sharing information I’d rather them not share. People are also, usually, more honest online. You can get away with being totally personal and true because they cannot see you. They can judge you if they want, and some do, but you do not have to sit in that uncomfortable tension like you do if it’s actually face to face (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013).

It relates to interactivity as seen under a message-based dimensions perspective which works as participants of the process perceive direction of communication, time flexibility, and sense of place dimensions. Since interactivity suggests a sequence of actions and reactions, the sense of feelings in those actions and reactions becomes an important aspect or element of the interactive event. “I feel closer to some members on Worthy (WCF) than I had with some I knew in person... they are real friends no matter how virtual our encounter may be. We fight like friends, cry together, and rejoice together like ‘real’ friends do” (personal communication by e-mail, May 24 and June 16, 2013). Or as says another participant, online forums are “a place where I can discuss openly the things that I have come to believe and receive objective criticism from others with opposing perspectives or confirmation from those who agree with my position” (personal communication by e-mail, June 18, 2013).

Based on the concept of participant-based dimensions, interactivity works as participants perceive level of control, responsiveness, and purpose of the communication event. That is present on the online religious practices of the participants in this study. Comparing offline church with his online religious experiences, a participant says that “online there are many more who will challenge what is posted, offering up more questions and ideas than a classroom where the teacher is there to teach and students are to listen. I have also been introduced to more study tools online than I ever was in church” (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

On considering the “message-based dimension” and the “participant-based dimension” on the discussion and definition of interactivity, there are important elements that are present on any human interactive process as senses of feelings, which point to social and psychological elements present in the communication act, as a participant articulated:

Sometimes you need people from different backgrounds, different perspectives, and different places in life to help you see more clearly... Sometimes you need a safe place to argue with people or a harbor to dock your boats and barges of questions, doubts and fears... I can ask questions, read research, pray with people, laugh, cry, share my struggles and my truth with people (personal communication by e-mail, June 13, 2013).

As mentioned in my literature review, Kousis’ operational definition of interactivity “not only describes the essence of theoretical definition of interactivity,

but may also help broaden the concept's boundaries... permitting analysis across media and individuals" (2002:378). His view of "mediated environment" created by new communication technologies and related to a reciprocal exchange of messages and actions defined as synchronous and asynchronous movements, are present in the participants' online religious experiences of this study.

When a participant mentioned she got involved in online forums because a "lack of interaction in the real world," I asked her if the online interaction is done in an "unreal world", and she said that it is not, and that it actually happens in a very real world to her, populated with strong believers.

As Bayam (2010) pointed, "new technologies offer many affordances that influence what happens through and because of them. The combination of interactivity and reach allow people to come together around shared interests, transcending local communities" (2010:97), which is has been shown by participants in this study.

Theoretical Conclusions Drawn from the Research Questions

The following five conclusions are drawn from this case study.

1. Online and Offline Church

Most of the literature showed that people were doing both religious practices, online and offline at the same time, with the online experience and practice being a supplement to their offline church attendance. Campbell (2005) found out that online

religious practices were done besides the offline church, as a complement. But at the same time, she saw the field of online religion as very dynamic, with rapid social changes, and that studies of religion online were beginning to address “how practices and interactions online within a specific community context may point to larger cultural shifts that describe or define our information-based society” (2005:312).

Out of the seven participants in this case study, who are all very active on the online forums, five are not members of an offline church, practicing their Christian faith solely online, and so they are not supplementing their religious practices at an offline church. And that has been happening for years. All of them came to the online forums from Christian denominations, but for most, they left their offline churches disappointed and found in the online forums their new community of faith, or their “online church experience.” It relates to RQ3, as to what extent is the use of the Internet substituting for traditional or offline church experience.

Their main reasons for leaving the offline church are related to church administrative issues: “It’s a clique, a social, almost hierarchical clique; I had to sit in on boring, crazy, political meetings about policies and changes that needed to be voted on” (personal communication by e-mails of June 13, 2013); to denominational doctrinal issues: “There is the leadership that represents the ‘doctrine’ of the church, where the Pastor or Priest is the one who they follow; there is no allowance for speaking up and asking questions, or offering up a different understanding of what the

scripture says” (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013). “For disagreeing, the pastor ended up labeling me contrary and unteachable and pushed me out of the church” (personal communication by e-mails of June 13, 2013); to legalism doctrines and/or Universalist Theology; to personal judgments like, pre-judged by physical appearance, intellectual prowess, social status, or status in the church; to social phobia and personal cliques; and related to care and social relationships: “My last church showed me that the church doesn’t care about its’ members; I did not feel that welcomed...they all seemed to have their own clique; the ministries I was a part of were there for their entertainment and not as much for helping others to know Jesus” (personal communication by e-mail, June 16, 2013); and lack of faith nourishment: “I was not being fed the Word and I craved for a deeper understanding, a closer walk with Christ” (personal communication by e-mail, May 22, 2013).

These reasons for leaving an offline church confirms Hutchings’ reasons for people to leave the traditional churches, “for theological differences, negative experiences, or the onset of a disability their church could not accommodate” (2012:216). Under these three basic and general reasons for people to leave their churches, a series of analysis can be done related to the churches’ structures and administrative policies, set of established doctrines, and face-to-face personal relationships. Those aspects are not present on the online practice of faith.

This case suggests a typology that would consider five main reasons for people to leave their offline churches and move to focus on their online religious practices, as the following: (a) problems with offline church structure and administrative issues; (b) concerns with denominational doctrinal issues; (c) the negative impact personal judgments among the members; (d) a perceived lack of care and social relationships issues with church members; (e) and lack of faith nourishment and depth of learning about scriptures.

These issues are so strong, that it makes the majority of participants in this case study turn to practicing their religion/faith only online during different numbers of years, even though they all realize that the online experience doesn't replace the offline church experience. At the same time, they suggest that their online experience doesn't replace their offline church experience. Despite that, they continue practicing their faith online. That paradox will be addressed on the finding about "community online or virtual/cyber community" listed below.

2. Concept of Church

There is a general concept of church among the different Christian denominations. *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* defines and describes the Christian church community as "the universal body of all who profess faith in Jesus Christ; a particular communion, confession, or denomination of Christians; the

institutional form of any such communion; a building used for Christian worship” (1989:185).

The case study shows that among the online religious practitioners participants in this research, there is not a common nor a clear concept of church as basically defined and professed throughout the history of the Christian church as some statements from participants show: “Church? Well, I have kind of given up on church for a while. So the time I spend with other Christians on worthy (WCF) is the only church I get right now really ,” by Beta; “there is the church that Christ builds, and there is the church man has built. The true Church is not made up of man’s doctrines, but by the Spirit of God...I don’t believe in denominations, “ by Alpha; “there have been many discussions about what is expected biblically in a church that I didn't have a grasp on, ” by Epsilon, (personal communication by e-mails, July 2, May 19, and June 16, 2013).

The data demonstrates that church has a denominational organizational meaning and a theological or spiritual meaning that mostly does not express or go with a historic meaning of church, which starts in the first Christian church led by Jesus’ apostles, and follows through the 15 first Centuries in the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, up to Martin Luther’s Reformation in 1517, with the “birth” of the Protestant churches and all those Christian denominations that follow it.

Since the Evangelical Christian churches have directly or indirectly their historic roots in the historic movement of Reformation and the participants of this study come from Evangelical Christian denominations or church traditions, it is pertinent to consider the concept and definition of church affirmed by the reformers, who were facing the condemnation from the Roman Catholic Church and the Empire.

In *The Augsburg Confession*, a historic document with 28 articles submitted by Philip Melancthon to the Emperor Charles V, at “The Diet of Augsburg,” Germany, in 1530, stating the biblical principles of the Christian faith “confessed” by the movement of Reformation, the basic definition of church (Article VII) says that “the Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered” (Tappert, 1959, p. 32). That definition of church considers a spiritual and a physical “congregation of saints” (members of the church redeemed and forgiven through faith in Christ), as well as considers the Gospel and the sacraments as part of the concept and definition of church.

On the concept of church expressed by the participants, sacraments are not part of it, and it’s related with their offline church experiences, coming from historic Reformed Protestant churches and Pentecostal or non-denominational churches.

A concept of church usually considers it to be a community of faith, a particular set of doctrines, a form of gathering/communion, and a place for worship. These very basic concepts of church, not going into a deeper theological biblical interpretation of

church, show a common concept of the Christian church which considers elements of community, gathering, common faith, expression of faith through worship, which must be considered on the online practices of faith, when considering the concept of church.

In the other hand, the Christian church today is being challenged by the impact and use of new communication technologies and their use, affecting peoples life and their faith concepts and practices, as Knut Lundby states: “The church as institution, with its material structure and bureaucracy, will be under constant challenge from individualized moves with the connectivity, immediacy, and sharing culture of the Net. New forms of church and networked religion may appear” (2012:37). And In “Religious authority in the age of the Internet,” Campbell and Teusner (2011) point to a challenge the traditional church (offline) is facing regarding its theological foundations due an internet culture being developed today, which “is challenging traditional Christian structures, especially those who appraise correct theological knowledge,” while the Internet “can create spaces for people to re-examine the doctrines, symbols, and practices of religious traditions” (p 65).

3. Learning About the Bible and Nurturing Faith

All participants in this case study point to the advantage of their online experiences over the offline church on learning about the Bible and nurturing their faith. Responses to RQ2 about what kinds of content the participants are looking in the

online forums, indicates a strong trust in their faith nurture through Bibles studies online and through their interactions. A lack of faith nourishment offline is being fulfilled online by a deeper understanding of the Bible, while online interaction and forums offer “a wider degree of biblical knowledge and cultural information about what is going on in other parts of the world by those who live there” as participant Alpha says.

Online opens unlimited possibilities of sources for biblical studies and faith nurturance on access to Bible Concordances with different Bible versions; online interlinear Bible (English and Greek or Hebrew original texts), as well as Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and other theological resources. Participants in this case study found online “a place where people from all over the world gather to discuss scripture, concerns, ask questions, encourage and pray for others” and “due to the high number so VERY knowledgeable people online, I have become way more knowledgeable myself ” (personal communication by e-mail, May 24, and July 4, 2013).

There is a wider degree of biblical knowledge offered online compared with the offline church, which in fact could be done as a supplement to an offline church participation. It shows also that online faith practices helps to “reduce dogma and to understand that my opinion is just an opinion” (personal communication by e-mail, June 20, 2013), which reinforces the aspect of the theology being open and adapted to a particular view or situation, in a changing pattern of study and access to theology,

where people can participate, adapt it, and make their contribution from their own perspectives, through the online interaction” (Horsfield, 2012). The case study shows that online religious Christian practitioners are learning and nurturing their faith (“growing in faith”) better than on their former experiences at offline churches, but on their own way and views.

4. Online Community

As the concept of online community or virtual community is widely used in the literature on studies about online religion, the findings of this study show individuals reaching out globally forming bonds with others, “overcoming the physical barriers and social distinctions that have held them apart”(Dawson, 2004:77). Participants found what Campbell (2005) lists as relational qualities in online community, such as emotional intimacy, trust, honesty, and openness. As one said, “Worthy (WCF) was a refuge from the storm. There was laughter there, community, hope, and most of all, love;” and another about the online forums wrote: “I know this may seem strange, but I feel closer to some members on Worthy than I had with some I knew in person.”

But on the other hand, most participants don’t see online community replacing the offline church community. “Online sites cannot replace the closeness one gets from a local gathering of the saints (church members)...there will never be a replacement for a true one-on-one personal relationship. This is how God created us.” So the paradoxes found in this case study are that the online religious practices

provide a community a positive and rewarding experience for the participants, but at the same time it doesn't replace what the offline church as community offers, and despite that, they continue just online.

5. Concepts of Worship in Offline and Online Experiences

As seen in the analysis of findings regarding RQ5, on what is the Internet as a virtual religious experience doing to the concept of place (sanctuary/temple) and church on the person's spiritual/religious experience, participants in this case study see as unnecessary a human setting, like a temple or sanctuary, for spiritual experiences in the Christian faith:

You can truly worship God online; does not have to be done within the confines of a building; my spiritual experience is dynamic in nature and does not follow a schedule or liturgy; whether that happens in a building or virtually doesn't seem like it should matter to me; I don't have a separate spiritual experience in church or online (personal communication by e-mail, July 2, 2013).

This shows a worship practice with different views and concepts about Christian worship.

When looking for answers to a question on whether the offline church worship would be substituted for online, the reaction of one case study participants was that:

There is no substitute at all, just a different location: it does not replace my real life encounters with other Christians; and there is nothing like worshipping with others in person. I cannot worship like this on the Internet. There are no comparisons at all. This is where online loses its value (personal communication by e-mail, June 3, 2013).

Besides different concepts of worship among the participants not aligned with a traditional Christian concept of worship, what is seen here is another paradox on the online religious practices regarding one of the historic importance with the spiritual element within the Christian faith, which is worship and its physical place. At the same time, participants don't see a need and no difference between worshipping at the offline church and online, they realize that there is no substitute of one by another, due the distinctiveness of offline worship.

In "Conclusion: Religion in a Digital Age: Future Developments and Research Directions," Fischer-Nielsen and Gelfgren (2012), based on the chapters of "Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture," by different scholars on a series of topics on online religion, they anticipate future developments on six emerging themes. The perception from the current studies point to digital media becoming increasingly mobile, more personalized, with more sophisticated environments online, power struggle becoming more complex, commercialization online increasing, and digital media penetrating the third world (p. 295).

Conclusion

In sum, there is a rich amount of research and approaches to the dynamic field of religion and communication particularly regarding religion and the new media, focusing on online religion or digital religion, which shows an increasing number of people who are going online for their religious practices, and in this case study, for

Christian faith practices online. They are finding online what was lacking in their offline church experiences, plus some expanded unique benefits provided by the new digital technologies, with online access to all kinds of resources and materials related to faith contents.

The aspect of concept should be considered, especially when the subject of study involves a specific religious group, like the Christian church, which is also challenged by a new reality of online community with all its dimensions, as well as faith practices in cyberspace and all what encompasses digital religion.

And finally this case study points to a dual reality and a paradox showed on the religious/faith practices of Christians online. While the participants are moving apart from the offline church to an active online faith experience and finding a sense of place and community online, at the same time they say it is not possible to completely substitute the offline church experience with the online faith experience. Also there is not only a feeling of lacking the offline physical church and community, but an intimate desire to belong and again be part of that. But at the same time they continue only online and yet apart from it. As one participant said: "I find myself longing for the day when this will happen...Don't know if it ever will, to be honest" (personal communication by e-mail, June 11, 2013).

A paradoxical reality is shown by the participants in this case study, where participants long to participate in an offline church, but are put off by a number of

things about the offline church as detailed above. So there is a clear indication that a rewarding spiritual faith practice is being experienced online.

In this dynamic and complex field of digital religion, there are new challenges facing the Christian churches, its members, and the academic community. Communication Scholar Stephen Reese (2010) writes in the Preface of his book “Hope for the Thinking Christian: Seeking a Path of Faith through Everyday Life:”

People in the twenty-first century are spiritually challenged. With so many crosscutting cultural and social pressures, it takes dedicated work to build an honest faith. We live in a fast-moving, diverse society with distractions of mobility and affluence, both actual and desired. Families are mixed, blended, and far-flung. Often we are far from home, if we are even sure where “home” is.

On their online faith practices, participants in this case study and certainly millions of others throughout the world today are ultimately seeking for a way to find “where home is.” While some of them still long for a home in the offline church, most of them seem to be finding a religious home online.

APPENDIX

Questionnaires

Questions for participant Alpha:

1. For how long time have you been involved in online religion discussion groups?
2. Have you been a church member? If yes, for how long time?
3. Could you briefly describe your church experience?
4. About your involvement with online discussion groups, why did you get involved with it, and what made you participate in Worthy Christian Forums discussion groups?
5. What have made you stay in the discussion group/forum?
6. You have some personal views/concepts about church and about being a part/member of the Christian church. By not believing in denominations, but in a (Christian) Church made by Christ, how do you see or perceive this church? Has it a form? How it's possible to know/see that it is made by Christ?
7. By participating/attending different denominations, would it not be or where you not participating in a Christian Church?
8. You seem actively dedicated to help people in different ways, running a homeless house, including preaching and teaching. How that relates to your Christian faith and what moves you to do it?
9. Could you share some thoughts about your experience on participating/going through other sites on discussion forums?
10. What were the main reasons for you to settle at Worthy?
11. What is the significance for you in participating on these forums?
12. What is different on your traditional former/present spiritual church experience from the online experience? Could you, please elaborate on these experiences?
13. When comparing church experiences with online experiences, you pointed to positive experiences in both places – church and online, saying that (online) you feel closer to some forum members at Worthy than you had with some you knew in person, and (in the other hand), there is no replacing the personal love one can gain from true personal relationships with someone you can actually touch (in a church group). Could you elaborate some more on that?

14. Comparing the physical place with the virtual on the Internet: How do you compare your spiritual experiences in a traditional church setting (in a sanctuary, temple) with your virtual online experiences on the Internet - discussion forums?
15. What is virtual doing to or affecting your spiritual/religious experience differently than or from your traditional church experience?
16. I would like to go back to the question related to “the virtual and the sanctuary/temple” experiences. I understood your point about the unnecessary human setting for spiritual experiences in the Christian faith, led by the Holy Spirit. I know you have not been a traditional church member, but would it be possible for you, based on whatever experience you had on worshiping in a temple or sanctuary (as a physical place), compare it with your online faith experience? The question is related basically on the faith practice experience in a physical place and on a “virtual space/place”. Is it possible to perceive it or explain it?
17. You described very well the difference between your online experiences of communicating with people, compared to the face-to-face communication that happens in a church setting, showing the positive and negative of both situations. Since you are now deeply on online activity regarding to your spiritual life, would you say that the present online experience is fulfilling your spiritual needs?
18. How and in what dimension the virtual interaction and experience has affected your faith in life?
19. How has the virtual spiritual experience affected your social/church relationships? (with people you have related or still relate at or from a church).
20. On the question about “the temple and the virtual spaces” you said that there are no comparison at all about worshipping, and this is where online loses its value. How is worship being substitute on your online spiritual/faith experience? If it is being substitute.
21. Could you elaborate more on how the virtual experience has replaced much of your social/church relationships?
22. What has been the impact of your online experience on the forum discussions on your biblical/doctrinal knowledge?
Could you mention the most important doctrine of the Christian faith that was nurtured or changed through your online experience?
23. Has your online experience changed your concept of church? If yes, how?

24. You have an interesting point about the impact of your online experience on you your spiritual/biblical knowledge and faith. Could you expand a little on the use of the wonderful tools you found online for that?
25. I use the term doctrine as a concept, or a set of beliefs. Looking it from that perspective, considering the doctrines of sin, salvation, baptism, etc., my question was on what of these or other doctrines (your personal set of beliefs) you were nurtured (assured, fortified) or maybe changed about what you believed prior to your online experience, by participating on the online forums?
26. Your faith experiences in churches has been disappointing to you do the different conflicting doctrines and practices of denominations, plus personal relationships within the churches. From what I perceive, you found a “virtual church” as your “family of faith”, but at the same time, you not only value the “traditional/physical church” as you also would like to be part of one without the issues and problems you have experienced when you attended them. If this is so, how do you see your online experience/activity/faith practice can help or lead you to your desired church?
27. I understand that you came to the online forums with some church experiences and with a set of Christian beliefs. How has your religious online experience impacted/affected/developed/changed your concepts/beliefs on what you already knew or believed? In what scale or dimension it happened, if it’s possible to say that?
28. What kind of change you have perceived on your theological/doctrinal knowledge/belief by participating on the online discussion groups?
I think I have covered that above. A deeper understanding of salvation, deeper understanding of how Christ works in and through us with the Holy Spirit, and how to choose my words better when discussing what I do believe. If this is too vague, please let me know.
29. Could you, please, list three very meaningful discussion topics (with a link) where you post/led/participate on Worthy?

Questions to participant Beta:

1. For how long time have you been involved in online religion discussion groups (including time outside Worthy)?
2. Have you been a church member? If yes, for how long time?
3. Could you describe your church membership or participation experiences?
4. Why did you get involved in online religious discussion group?

5. You had a dual interesting experience with two different churches, showing two different situations that caused you to leave the churches – one “doctrinal/practice” situation, and another “structural/administrative”. How these two experiences affected your (personal Christian) faith?
6. How happened, that college drastically changed your perspective on God and faith and religion?
7. You described very well your experience on the forums. What would you say was or has been the main reason for you to stay in the online discussion forums?
8. How would you describe Worthy “being a refuge from the storm,” considering the “refuge” being a “virtual place?”
9. What is the significance for you in participating on these Christian forums?
10. What is different on your traditional former church/spiritual experience from the online experience? Could you, please compare these two experiences?
11. You mentioned that you needed answers for things you couldn’t find in the real world, so you went online. Where them spiritual answers?
12. You had a dating experience on Worthy. Is this common to others on Worthy too?
13. You wrote that sometimes you find God there - online. Could you explain what you mean by “sometimes”?
14. You have an interesting statement about the presence of God online: “I’ve never ‘felt’ God’s presence online like I have surrounded by other people my age crying out to a God they are desperate to connect to. “Could elaborate more on that?
15. How do you compare your spiritual experience in a traditional church setting/space (in a sanctuary, temple) with your virtual (space?) online experience on discussion forums?
16. What is virtual doing to your spiritual/religious experience by being online?
17. On finding spiritual answers on your online experience/participation, without invading/exposing any privacy issues, could you please, share on how or in what way you’re the online experience provided spiritual answers to your questions?
18. You mentioned some differences between the experiences of worshiping God in a temple and online, and said that “you can truly worship God online”. How would you describe how that worship happens?
19. How and in what dimension the virtual interaction and experience has affected your faith in life?

20. How has the virtual spiritual experience affected your social/church prior or present relationships?
21. What has been the impact of your online experience at Worthy on your biblical/doctrinal knowledge about God, faith, sin, salvation, baptism, and other Christian doctrines?
22. Is there any special doctrine or area of biblical knowledge in which you changed, developed, discovered on your online experience?
23. Has your online experience/practice changed your concept of church from your earlier or present church experience? If yes, how, in what ways? I don't understand this question.
24. When you log on, where you go on Worthy? What normally drives/compels you to log on?
25. Do you have specific boards on Worthy you are more active with your posts? What would they be?
26. What are the three most important topics you like to discuss or post?
27. You have had church/faith experiences as a member. You built/developed/was taught a concept of church, on what mean a church, a Christian church. Now you have an online spiritual/faith experience on Worthy. What I would like to know is if your religious experience/practice online today, has changed in some way your concept of church, what means a church for you, ok?
28. Being part of Worthy during some years, how would you describe your experience as a member of an "online community"? How that community developed, changed, moved?
29. Have you build personal/virtual relationships on your online experience at Worthy?
30. Could you, please, more one or two very meaningful discussion topics (with a link) where you post/led/participate on Worthy?

Questions to participant Gamma:

1. For how long time have you been involved in online religion discussion groups (including time outside Worthy)?
2. Have you been a church member? If yes, for how long time?
3. Could you describe your church membership or participation experiences?
4. Why did you get involved in online religious discussion group?

5. You joined the church you described with enthusiasm and dedication. Did you have a prior church or Christian faith experience? What moved you to have that kind of vivid faith experience?
6. What makes you think that the Pastor of that church ended up labeling you contrary and unteachable?
7. You came to the online Christian community seeking for Biblical studies and knowledge. Besides the 3 years of church membership described, did you have had some previous Biblical knowledge?
8. What made you decide to stay in the discussion forums in general and particularly at Worthy?
9. What is the significance for you in participating on these forums?
10. What is different on your traditional former church/spiritual experience from the online experience? Could you, please elaborate on these experiences?
11. About being part of the online forums for not being thrown out, as you mentioned, what is there that you like or consider important?
12. How you see and feel the Christian community you found online?
13. You mention that “either my affiliation with a Christian Church or an online forum has been beneficial in the respect of seeking sobriety of mind that includes mental and emotional stability.” Looking specifically into your online experience on the forums, what is lacking on that online experience regarding to your statement?
14. How do you compare your spiritual experience in a traditional church setting (in a sanctuary, temple) with your virtual online experience on discussion forums?
15. What is virtual doing to your spiritual/religious experience? How your spiritual life/fait h is being impacted by the virtual activity?
16. About the church spiritual experience and the online experience, you mention that you don’t have a separate experience, which I understood your point. Maybe I didn’t get clear my question, so I come back to that. By spiritual experience I mean faith activity in a church setting, like worshipping, having Bible studies, being in a sanctuary, singing, praying with others physically present, etc.. Comparing with your online experience (“faith practice”), is that the same for you on both situations (environment?)?
17. Does the words written on the computer screen create a sense o “online community for you? How that works?
18. How important do you see the personal face-to-face communication and relationship in your faith practice and spiritual life?

19. How and in what dimension the virtual interaction and experience has affected your faith in life?
20. How has the virtual spiritual experience/practice affected your social/church relationships?
21. Are you still attending church activities? If yes, how would you describe your involvement/time between your church participation with your online activity?
22. What has been the impact of your online experience in the forums on your biblical/doctrinal knowledge about God, faith, sin, salvation, baptism, and other Christian doctrines?
23. Is there any special doctrine or area of biblical knowledge in which you changed, developed, discovered on your online experience?
24. Has your online experience/practice changed your concept of church from your earlier or present church experience? If yes, how, in what ways?
25. When you log on, where you go on Worthy? What normally drives/compels you to log on?
26. Do you have specific boards on Worthy you are more active with your posts?
27. What would be your three preferred forum boards on Worthy?
28. What are the three most important topics you like to discuss or post?
29. Being part of Worthy during some years, how would you describe your experience as a member of an "online community"? How that community developed, changed, moved?
30. Have you build personal/virtual relationships on your online experience at Worthy?
31. Overall how do you see or analyze the aspect of an "online community" from your experience on Worthy?

Questions to participant Delta:

1. For how long time have you been involved in online religion discussion groups?
2. Have you been a church member? If yes, for how long time?
3. Could you briefly describe your church membership or participation experience?
4. Why did you get involved in this online religious discussion group?
5. You have been a church member for the last 20 years. Could you share about your becoming a church member (a Christian)?

6. You have today a strong commitment and involvement with your church. Without identifying the church, is it a traditional/historic or a non-denominational kind of church?
You searched for online Christian discussion forums. What moved you to that direction?
7. What made you stay in the WCF?
8. You have an interesting statement which I would like to ask you to develop a little on each of the four aspects mentioned about your online experience, which are: “online community”; “where I could get plugged in”; “grow”; and “be a blessing to others”. How it happens in each of these aspects you mentioned?
9. What is the significance for you in participating on these forums?
10. What is different on your (traditional) church/spiritual experience from the online experience? Could you, please elaborate on these two kinds of experiences related to your faith?
11. When comparing church experiences with online experiences, you pointed to positive experiences in both places – church and online, saying that “online there are connections through worship, prayer, and Bible study as well (as in the church). There are three aspects of Christian faith practices mentioned – worship, prayer, and Bible study. Could you elaborate more specifically about each of these on how this happens online? (This is a very interesting for this study!)
12. You mentioned people being judgmental in church. How much that aspect of people’s (church members) attitude affects your spiritual faith/life?
13. Is the religious (Christian) “online environment” free of judgment?
14. Comparing the church physical place with a “virtual place” on the Internet: How do you compare your spiritual experiences (mostly worship) in a traditional church setting (in a sanctuary, temple) with your virtual online experiences on the Internet – on the discussion forums?
15. What is virtual doing to or affecting your spiritual/religious experience differently than or from your traditional church experience?
16. You mentioned forums designated specifically for music, prayer and praises at Worthy. Do they substitute these spiritual/faith practices done in a physical church environment? How?
17. I understand that with “move” to an online spiritual/faith experiences, you are in “a new season of life”. Could you elaborate on this new season of life?

18. From your online experience, how a “virtual environment” fosters learning, growing, and sharing life together?
19. How and in what dimension the online virtual interaction and experience has affected your faith in life?
20. How has the online virtual spiritual experience affected your social/church relationships?

Questions to participant Epsilon:

1. For how long time have you been involved in online religion discussion groups?
2. Have you been a church member? If yes, for how long time?
3. Have you been a church member? If yes, for how long time?
4. Why did you get involved in online Christian discussion forums?
5. Why worthy was the most suitable forum site for you, making it “your home”?
6. Seems that you like your church experience and even misses it when not attending. Could you share why you are not a member of the church you are attending?
7. Could you explain “the sense of security” you found at Worthy and online experience provides to you?
8. What is the significance/special/meaningful for you in participating on these forums?
9. What is different on your traditional former/present church/spiritual experience from the online experience? Could you, please elaborate on these experiences?
10. You have an interesting statement about “the people at worthy (for the most part) are “real.” Could you explain how you perceive the “real people” on a virtual space or “community”?
11. How do you perceive/feel that “people there (online) genuinely care for one another”?
12. You mentioned that you always learn something new when participating in the forums. What kind of content you are enjoying to learn?
13. How do you compare your spiritual experience in a traditional church setting (in a sanctuary, temple) with your virtual online experience on discussion forums?
14. What is virtual/online forums doing to your spiritual/religious experience?
15. You say that you feel a traditional church setting more spiritual than being online in front of a computer. What would you describe as “spiritual” on your online experience when posting on the forums or chatting?
16. Could you identify a “something” also when you are online posting or chatting?

What do you mean by the online activity on the forums giving you “the godly atmosphere” that you don’t have with your friends and your community?

17. How and in what dimension the virtual interaction and experience has affected your faith in life?
18. You wrote: “ I came to Worthy with a lot of issues and doubts about a lot of things- and they have really helped me in those areas.” Could you share about issues and doubts you got help on Worthy?
19. About the question on how has the virtual spiritual experience affected your social/church relationships, what I would like to know is: how much your online activity (on the forums) has an effect on your social relationships (with friends, family members, classmates, anyone) and with people in church that you relate to? Has your online activity changed something on these relationships?
20. What has been the impact of your online experience in the forum discussions on your biblical/doctrinal knowledge about God, faith, sin, salvation, baptism, and other Christian doctrines (faith concepts)?
21. What Biblical content have you learned or improved through your online forums activity?
22. Has your online experience changed your concept of church (what means church, what you understand by church)? If yes, in what ways, how?
23. What kind of clashes did you have with moderators and others, when you came to Worthy?
24. You mentioned you had false theology or ideology? Could you comment on the kinds of those?
25. On the question about your online experience/activity and its impact on your biblical content knowledge, you mentioned love, which really is at the center of the Gospel. What about the Bible content like creation of the Old Testament, Israel, the prophets, the New Testament, the Gospels, Jesus, ? How your online experience has impacted it?
26. Does your online experience and activity “substitute “the church?
27. How has your religious online experience impacted/affected/developed/changed your concepts/beliefs on what you already knew or believed? If yes, how?
28. What kind of change you have perceived on your theological/doctrinal knowledge/belief by participating on the online discussion groups?

Questions for participant Zeta:

1. For how long time have you been involved in online religion discussion groups (even besides on Worthy)?
2. Have you been a church member? If yes, for how long time? I was but not now.
3. Could you briefly describe your church membership or participation experience past and present?
4. Why did you get involved in online Christian discussion forums?
5. You are very active on the online Christian forums, with 8 years of participation, and only one year being a church member, and with a “very spotty” participation. Could you explain how did you develop your Christian faith/beliefs/ Bible knowledge? How much in that one year of church attendance and how much on the forums?
6. The lack of interaction with other Christians you mentioned, was in what area – personal, doctrinal, spiritual? Why you think it happened?
7. What were you expecting by participating in a church, which you didn’t get?
8. The reason you mentioned to get involved in online forums was a “lack of interaction in the real world”. Is the online interaction done in an “unreal world”? Could you explain how you perceive that?
9. What would you say that made you stay with Worthy Forums when you joined it, and what makes you such an active member?
10. What is the significance for you in participating on these forums?
11. You are looking for a church. What is lacking on your spiritual online experience/activity?
12. You didn’t find a sense of fellowship in the church. Did you find it online, on the forums? If yes, how would you describe it?
13. You mentioned that the online experience has brought some good changes for you. How these changes relate to your spiritual life (with God)? And in your life at all?
14. What is different on your traditional former/present church experience from the online experience? Could you, please elaborate on how these two faith/spiritual experiences are different?
15. I understand that you are spiritually ok with your online religious practices on the forums. Seems that your online experience is “substituting” the (traditional) church. , is it so?
16. Why would you like to take your family members to the a church (I understand it as a traditional church)?

17. On the fellowship online, could you identify what would be needed to feel it stronger than it is for you?
18. When you are in a church setting (sanctuary, temple, and worship place) you have the presence of people, a face-to-face communication process going on, a “community” feeling or sense, with music, songs, visual impact, etc. Can that spiritual experience be the same as your online spiritual experience? If yes, how is it?
19. How do you compare your spiritual experience in a traditional church setting (in a sanctuary, temple) with your virtual online experience on Worthy?
20. What would you say is virtual doing to your spiritual/religious experience?
21. You have found more fellowship online than on your church experience. How and in what dimension the virtual interaction and experience has affected your faith in life?
22. How has the virtual (online) spiritual experience/practice affected your social relationships?
23. What has been the impact of your online forum discussions experience on your biblical/doctrinal knowledge about God, faith, sin, salvation, baptism, or other Christian doctrines?
24. Have you changed some concepts or developed the more strongly? If yes, could you mention some and how it happened?
25. Has your online experience changed your concept of church? If yes, how, in what ways?
26. When you log on, where you go on Worthy? What normally drives/compels you to log on?
27. Do you have specific boards on Worthy you are more active with your posts?
28. What would be your three preferred forum boards on Worthy?
29. Being part of Worthy during some years, how would you describe your experience as a member of an “online community”? How that community developed, changed, moved?
30. Have you build personal/virtual relationships on your online experience at Worth
31. Overall how do you see or analyze the aspect of an “online community” from your experience on Worthy?
32. Could you, please, list three very meaningful discussion topics (with a link) where you post/led/participate on Worthy?

Questions for participant Eta:

1. For how long time have you been involved in online religion discussion groups (including Worthy)?
2. I saw on your post that you were raised in a Christian family. Have you been a church member? For how long time
3. Could you briefly describe your church experience?
4. Why did you get involved in this online religious discussion group site (Worthy)?
5. What made you decide to stay in the discussion group/forums?
6. About your church relation-participation, I understand that although you didn't belong formally to a church as a "voting member", you had varied experience on attending church services, programs. Also you have a consistent knowledge of the Bible (by using texts in all your responses, as well as in your posts). Based on observation above: How much of your Bible knowledge came from your church participation experiences, and how much came from your online experiences? Could you elaborate on that?
7. Seems that you had a military career. Was your "guest participation" in different churches due to the moves this kind of career relates to or what made you attend to different churches/denominations?
8. You are actively downloading and hearing Podcasts. What are the main (doctrinal) sources of them? What makes/move you to use/hear them?
9. I understood that your relationship with Worthy Christian Forums started or was closely related to a long personal concern you had about the persecution to the Jew /Israel and their salvation (through Christ), which connected you to George. Was it so? If yes, why the specific concern with Jew/ Israel?
10. You had a good online experience before connecting to Worthy. How was that experience and how it was related with your spiritual life?
11. What is the significance for you in participating on the online forums?
12. What is different on your traditional church/spiritual experience from the online experience? Could you, please elaborate on these two kinds of experiences?
13. You mentioned "the Joy Of Communing World-Wide With Jesus And With Those Royal Kids, My Siblings" and "Talking Jesus, Jesus All Day Long" on the internet. What means that related to the Internet?
14. About the difference between traditional church and online experiences: What means being "passive" and "active"?
15. What means that the online ministry is the ministry for the called?

16. How do you compare your spiritual experience in a traditional church setting (in a sanctuary, temple) with your virtual online experience on the discussion forums?
17. What is virtual – the online spiritual activity doing to your spiritual/religious experience?
18. You mentioned “ the Joy Of Communing World-Wide With Jesus And With Those Royal Kids, My Siblings” and “Talking Jesus, Jesus All Day Long” on the internet. What means that related to the Internet?
19. About the difference between traditional church and online experiences:
20. What means being “passive” and “active”?
21. What means that the online ministry is the ministry for the called?
22. How do you compare your spiritual experience in a traditional church setting (in a sanctuary, temple) with your virtual online experience on the discussion forums?
23. What is virtual – the online spiritual activity doing to your spiritual/religious experience?
24. How do you compare your spiritual experience in a traditional church setting (in a sanctuary, temple) with your virtual online experience on the discussion forums?
25. What is different on being part of a “physical church” and on being part of a “church online”?
26. What is virtual – the online spiritual activity doing to your spiritual/religious experience?
27. How has your faith being impacted/changed by the internet online activity?
28. How and in what dimension the virtual interaction and experience has affected your faith in life?
29. How has the virtual spiritual experience affected your social/church relationships?
30. Could you, please, list three very meaningful discussion topics (with a link) where you post/led/participate on Worthy?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakardjieva, M. (2005). *Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Barna Research Group, 'More Americans Are Seeking Net-Based Faith Experiences' (May 21, 2001) <http://www.barna.org/cig-binP...asap?PressReleaseID=90>.
- Barna Research Group, 'Number of Unchurched Adults Has Nearly Doubled Since 1991' (May 4, 2004) [http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate & BarnaUpdateID=163](http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=163).
- Bayam, N. K. (2010). *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, by Nancy K. Baym, Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA : Polity.
- Biernatzki, W. (2006). "Religion and the Internet", *Communication Research Trends*. 26 (p. 19).
- Bluck, J. (1989). *Christian Communication Reconsidered*. Geneva: WCC Publications.
- Bolter, J. D.; Grusin, R. (1999). *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Brasher, Brenda E. (2004) *Give Me That Online Religion*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Brauchler, B. (2007). Religious Conflicts in Cyberage. *Citizenship Studies*, 11(4).
- Buddenbaum, J. M. (2002) "Social Science and the Study of Media and Religion: Going Forward by Looking Backward." *Journal of Media and Religion* (11):13-24.
- Campbell, H. (2003). "Approaches to Religious Research in Computer-Mediated Communication" in J. Mitchell and S. Marriage (eds.), *Mediating Religion: Studies of Media, Religion and Culture*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
- Campbell, H. (2004). "Challenges Created by Online Religious Networks." *Journal of Media and Religion*, 3(2): 81-89.

- Campbell, H. (2005). *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Campbell, H. (2005). "Considering Spiritual Dimensions Within Computer –Mediated Communication Studies." *Journal of Media and Religion*, 7(1):110–134.
- Campbell, H. (2005). Making Space for Religion in Internet Studies. *The Information Society*, 21, 309–315.
- Campbell, H. (2006). "Religion and the Internet." *Communication Research Trends*, 25 (1)3-24.
- Campbell, H. (2010). *When Religion Meets new Media*, London: Routledge.
- Campbell, H. (2011). "Religious Authority in the Age of the Internet." *Christian Reflections*, Center of Christian Ethics at Baylor University: 59-68.
- Campbell, H. (2012). *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, New York: Routledge.
- Cannon, D. F. (2008). Speaking of Faith: Public Relations Practice Among Religion Communicators in the United States. Doctoral Dissertation. The University of Texas at Austin, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing: 3341555.
- Carey, J.W. (1989). *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- Casey, C.A. (2007). *Virtual Ritual, Real Enactment: An Examination of the Conditions for Online Religious Ritual as Enacted Symbol*. Doctoral Dissertation. New York University, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing: 3278612.
- Chama, J. (1996). "Finding God on the Web." By Joshua Cooper Ramo/Chama , Monday, Dec. 16, 1996 <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,985700,00.html>.
- Cheong, P. H., Halavais, A., Kwon, K. (2008). The Chronicles of Me: Understanding Blogging as a Religious Practice. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 7, 107–131.

- Cheong, P. H., Poon, J. P. H., Huang, S., Casas, I. (2009). The Internet Highway and Religious Communities: Mapping and Contesting Spaces in Religion-Online. *The Information Society*, 25, 291–302.
- Christians, C. G. Religious Perspectives on Communication Technologies. *Journal of Media and Religion*, (1) 37-47.
- Clark, Lyn Schofield (2003) *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cobb, J. (1998). *The Search for God in the Digital World*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Concordia Reference Bible (1989). Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.
- Cooper, T. W. (2006). The Medium Is the Mass: Marshall McLuhan's Catholicism and Catholicism. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 5(3), 161–173.
- Dawson, L. L. (2004). Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community. In Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D. E. (Ed.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Dawson, Lorne L. (2000) 'Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies', in J. K. Hadden and D. Cowan (eds), *Religion and the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*. Greenwich, CT: Elsevier.
- Dawson, Lorne L. and Cowan, Douglas E. (eds) (2004) *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Dixon, P. (1997) *Cyberchurch, Christianity, and the Internet*. Eastbourne: Kingsway.
- Downes, E. J. McMillan, S. J. (2000). Defining Interactivity: A Qualitative Identification of Key Dimensions. *New Media and Society*, (2), pp. 157-180.
- Eisner, E. W. (1997). The New Frontier in Qualitative Research Methodology. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3, 259-273.
- Elliott, Peter. "Social Experiment: Christian Group Gains Large Following on Facebook," in *everydaychristian.com*, July 2009, <http://everydaychristian.com/news/story/687/>.

- Engelbrecht, Edward A. , ed. (2011). The Church From Age to Age. Saint Louis., MO: Concordia Publishing House.
- Ferré, J. P. (2000) "Protestant Press Relations, 1930-1970" In: W. D. Sloan (Ed.), *The Media and Religion in American History* (pp. 261-274). Northport: Vision.
- Fiedler, R. (1997). *Metamorphosis: Understanding New Media*. CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Fischer-Nielsen, P. and Gelfgren, S. (2012) "Conclusion: Religion in a Digital Age: Future Developments and Research Directions." In P. H. Cheong; P. Fischer-Nielsosn.; S. Gelfgren.; & C. Ess (Eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture* (p. 295). New York: Peter Lang.
- Foltz, F., Foltz, F. (2003). Religion on the Internet: Community and Virtual Existence. *Bulletin of Science Technology Society*, 23, 321-330.
- Fore, W. F. (1987). *Television and Religion: The Shaping of Faith, Values, and Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.
- Gelfgren, S. (2012). "Let There Be Digital Networks and God Will Provide Growth: Comparing Aims and Hopes of 19th Century and Post-Millennial Christianity." In P. H. Cheong; P. Fischer-Nielsosn.; S. Gelfgren.; & C. Ess (Eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture* (p. 235). New York: Peter Lang.
- Foley J. P., *The Church and the Internet Pontifical* , Council For Social Communications, Vatican City: February 22, 2002.
- Gerbener, G., Gross, L., Hoower, S., Morgan, M., Signorielli, N., & Wuthnow, R. (1994), *Religion and Television*. Philadelphia: Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, and Gallup Organization, Inc.
- Griffin, Wendy (2004) 'The Goddess Net', in L. L. Dawson and D. Cowan (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Hackett, R.I.J. (2006). Religion and the Internet. *Diogenes*, 53, 67-76.
- Powell, M. A. (2011). *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (Ed.). New York: Harper Collins.

- Harry Ransom Center Gallery, at The University of Texas ([www.hrc. utexas.edu/ exhibitions/ permanent/gutenbergbible/](http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent/gutenbergbible/)).
- Haythornthwaite, C. (2001). Introduction: The Internet in Everyday Life. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45, 363-382.
- Heider, D. (2000). *White News: Why Local News Programs Don't Cover People of Color*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Helland, C. (2012). Ritual. In H. A. Campbell (Ed.), *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (p. 33). New York: Routledge.
- Hiller, H. H. & Franz, T. M. (2004). New ties, old ties and lost ties: the use of the internet in diaspora. *New Media & Society*, 6(6), 731–752.
- Hine, C. (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hogan, B. and Wellman, B. (2012). The Immanent Internet Redux. In P. H. Cheong; P. Fischer-Nielsosn.; S. Gelfgren.; & C. Ess (Eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture* (p. 49). New York: Peter Lang.
- Howard, P. N. & Jones, S. (2004). *Society Online: The Internet in Context*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hoover, S. M. and Lundby, K. (1997). *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Hoover, S. M. (1998). *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hoover, S. M. and Clark, L.S. (2002). *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hoover, S. M., Clark, L. S., & Rainie, L. (2004). *Faith Online*. Retrieved from [http://www.pewinternet. org/Reports/2004/Faith Online.aspx](http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2004/FaithOnline.aspx).
- Hoover, S. M. (2012). "Foreword: Practice, Autonomy, and Authority in the Digitally Religious and Digitally Spiritual." In P. H. Cheong; P. Fischer-Nielsosn.; S. Gelfgren.; & C. Ess (Eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture* (p. xii). New York: Peter Lang.

- Horsfield, P. (2012). "A Moderate Diversity of Book?" The Challenge of New Media to the Practice of Christian Theology. In P. H. Cheong; P. Fischer-Nielsosn.; S. Gelfgren.; & C. Ess (Eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture* (p. 243). New York: Peter Lang.
- Hutchings, T. (2010). Creating Church Online: An ethnographic study of five internet-based Christian communities. (PhD dissertation, Theology and Religion). Durham University, England.
- Hutchings, T. (2012). Creating Church Online: Networks and Collectives Contemporary Christianity. In P. H. Cheong; P. Fischer-Nielsosn.; S. Gelfgren.; & C. Ess (Eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture* (p. 207). New York: Peter Lang.
- International Society for Media, Religion, and Culture (ISMRC) <http://cmrc.colorado.edu/cmrc-conferences/international-conference-on-media-religion-and-culture/>.
- Jensen, K. B. (2002). The Qualitative Process, in Jensen, K.B. (ed) A Handbook of Media and Communication Research, London: Routledge.
- Kyle, R. G. (2010). The Electronic Church: An Echo of American Culture. *Direction Journal*, 39 (2), 162-176.
- Kiousis, Spiro (2002), "Interactivity: A Concept Explication," *New Media & Society*, 4 (3), 355-383.
- Kosinets, R.V. (2010). Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online. London : Sage.
- Lampstand Christian Forums: <http://www.lampstandstudy.com/forum/>
- Larsen. E. (2004). Cyberfaith: How Americans Pursue religion Online. In Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D. E. (Ed.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Lawrence, Bruce B. (2000) *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Religions Online*. Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books.
- Lee. H. (2005). "Behavioral Strategies for Dealing with Flaming in an Online Forum." *The Sociological Quarterly*, 46(2) 385-403.

- Lindlof, T. R. (2002). Interpretive Community: An Approach to Media and Religion. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 1(1), 64-74.
- Lindlof, T. R. & Taylor, B. C. (2010). *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* (3rd Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lindlof, T. R., & Shatzer, M. J. (1998). Media ethnography in virtual space: Strategies, limits, and possibilities, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (Vol. 42, pp. 170-189).
- Lorne Dawson and Doug Cowan ,eds., (2004). *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* Routledge.
- Lövheim, M. (2012). Identity. In H. A. Campbell (Ed.), *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (p. 49). New York: Routledge.
- Lundby, K. (2011). Religion and the Internet: Considering the Online and Offline *Connection*. *Information Communication and Society* 14 (8).
- Lunby, K. (2012). Dreams of Church in Cyberspace. In P. H. Cheong; P. Fischer-Nielsosn.; S. Gelfgren.; & C. Ess (Eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture* (p. 31). New York: Peter Lang.
- Lutheran Hour Ministries: <http://www.lhm.org/>.
- Machin, D. (2002). *Ethnography Research for Media Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Markham, A.N. & Baym, N.K. (2009) *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McCall, G. J. & Simmons, J. L., Eds. (1969). *Issues in Participant Observation: A Text and Reader*, Reading MA: Addison-Wesley.
- McGrath, Alister E. (1997). *An Introduction to Christianity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers
- McCombs, M. (2004). *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and the Public Opinion*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- McLuhan, Marshall (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

- McQuail, D. (2000). *Mass Communication Theory* (4th ed.). London: Sage.
- Meho L. I. (2006). E-Mail Interviews in Qualitative Research: A Methodological Discussion. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*.
- Miczek, N. (2012). "'Go Online!' said my guardian Angel" – The Internet as a platform for religious negotiation. In H. A. Campbell (Ed.), *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (p. 219). New York: Routledge.
- Mitchel, J. & Marriage, S. (2003). *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion, and Culture*. London: T&T Clark.
- Moore, J. L. & Flowers, L. A. (2002). Using the Internet to collect qualitative data: An exploratory study assessing the effectiveness of conducting qualitative research online versus traditional interviewing techniques for African American college students. In *Student Affairs Online*, vol. 4 no. 1 - Winter 2003
- Murray, C. D. & Sixsmith, J. (2003). E-Mail: A Qualitative Research Medium for Interviewing? in *Interviewing, Sage Benchmarks in Social Methods*, Fielding, N. (Ed) ol. 2, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Negroponte, N.P. (1995). *Being Digital*. New York: Vintage.
- Pankow, F. & Pankow, E. (1992). *75 Years of Blessings and The Best is Yet to Come*. Saint Louis, MO: International Lutheran Laymen's League.
- Pavlik, J. V. (1996). *New Media Technology: Cultural and Commercial Perspectives*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Pew Internet & American Life Project, Faith Online, University of Colorado at Boulder, April 2004. Retrieved from: <http://www.pewInternet.org/>
- Poindexter, P. M. & McCombs, M. E. (2000). *Research in Mass Communication*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Poindexter, P. M. (2012). *Millennials, News, and Social Media*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

- Potter, W. J. (1996). *An Analysis of Thinking and Research About Qualitative Methods*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. Practice in New Media Worlds (p. 219). New York: Routledge.
- Rand, L. (2009). The Church on Facebook. *Christian Century*, June 30, 2009, pp. 22-25.
- Rafaeli, Sheizaf (1988). "Interactivity: From New Media to Communication," in *Advancing Communication Science: Merging Mass and Interpersonal Processes*, R. P.
- Real, M.R. (1989) *Super Media*. London: Sage.
- Reese, S. D. (2010). *Hope for the Thinking Christian*. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys.
- Religion and Television. Philadelphia: Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, and Gallup Organization, Inc.
- Rheingold, H. (1993). *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Canada: A William Patrick Book.
- Rubin, H. J. & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 2nd Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Saldanha, J. (2009). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sample, T. (1998). *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Schramm, Wilbur. (1961) *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, 5th Edition, University of Illinois Press Urbana.
- Schroeder, R. and Heather, N. and Lee, R. *The Sacred and the Virtual: Religion in Multi-User Virtual Reality*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 4 (1999).
- Schulze, Q. J. *Communication as Religion: In Memory of James W. Carey, 1935–2006*, *Journal of Media and Religion* 6 (2007): 1-15.
- Severin, W.J. & Tankard, James W. (2001). *Communication Theories: Origins, Methods, and Uses in the Mass Media*. New York: Longman.

- Shoemaker, P. J. & Reese, S. D. (1996). *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on the Mass media Content*. New York: Longman.
- Smith, M. A. & Kollock, P., eds. (1999). *Communities in Cyberspace*. London: Routledge.
- Stolow, J. (2005). Religion and/as Media. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22(4), 119–145.
- Stout, D. A. (2003). The End of *Plovering*: A new Home for the Study of Media and Religion. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2 (2) 69-73.
- Stout, D.A., & Buddenbaum, J.M. (1996). *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Straubhaar, J. & LaRose, R. (2008). *Media Now: Understanding Media, Culture, and Technology*. Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth.
- Tappert, T. G., Ed. (2005) *The Book of Concord*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- Teske, J.A. Cyberspsychology, Human Relationships, and our Virtual Interiors, *Zygon*, 37 (September 2002): 677-700.
- Crim, K. (1990). *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* (Ed.). New York: Harper One
- The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Trends 2005 Religion & Public Life: A Faith-Based Partisan Divide*, Pew Research Center (<http://pewresearch.org>), Washington, DC.
- Given, L. M. (2008). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tremayne, M. & Dunwoody, S. (2001), "Interactivity, Information Processing, and Learning on the World Wide Web," *Science Communication*, 23 (2), 111-134.
- Tremayne, M. (2005), "Lessons Learned from Experiments with Interactivity on the Web. " *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 5 (2) <http://www.jiad.org/vol5/no2/tremayne/index.html>
- Tremayne, M., Chen, X., Figur, N., Huang, S. (2007). Perceived Authority and Communication Channel Experiments With Instant Messaging. *Social Science Computer Review*, 2007.

- Turner, B. S. (2007). Religious Authority and the New Media. *Theory Culture Society*, 24, 117-134.
- Tynman, D. "PC Meets TV." *PC World*, February 1994:139).
- Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: Free Press.
- Wilson, L. (1999). *The Wired Church: Making Media Ministry*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Wilson, W. (2000). *The Internet Church*. Nashville: Word.
- Woolgar, S., ed. (2002) *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality*. Oxford: University Press.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case Study Research: Design and Method (5th ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Young, Glenn (2004) 'Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity', in L. L. Dawson and D. Cowan (Eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Zaleski, J. (1997) *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology Is Changing Our Spiritual Lives*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.
- Zukowski, A. & Babin, P. *The Gospel in Cyberspace: Nurturing Faith in the Internet Age*. Chicago: Loyola Press.