

Exploring the lived experiences
of online worshipers

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Abstract

This ongoing qualitative study uses long interviews to seek to understand the lived experiences of individuals who participate in online church services. Online church has rapidly grown in the past few years and many Americans have participated in, or are willing to participate in, alternatives to traditional worship. Many churches are adopting online formats as a way to address the interest of individuals in alternative worship experiences. This study seeks to understand how individuals use online worship and how it plays into their spiritual lives.

Introduction

While every Christian chooses to worship God in their own way and in a place of their choosing, many of these expressions of worship take place in a congregational setting in a brick and mortar building. However, many worshipers are moving online to worship (Barna, 2009) and many churches are creating online opportunities to meet the needs of those worshipers. This qualitative study utilizes long interviews to understand the experiences of worshipers who have chosen to express their faith through online venues. Sixty-four percent of Americans are “completely open” to carrying out and pursuing their faith in an environment or structure that differs from that of a typical church (Barna, 2009). Twenty-three percent of adults in America said they had not attended a traditional church service in the past year (Barna, 2008). For some worshipers, traditional worship has been replaced by cyber church. These cyber congregations are often absent traditional binds of shared identity (Howard, 2010).

Christianity Today (Pulliam, 2009) highlighted the work of Joel Hunter, pastor of Northland Church in Orlando, Florida. The church grew from 200 members in one location to a church of more than 12,000 members with four brick and mortar sites and an Internet based

congregation. The church employs one pastor whose only job is to work with members in the online congregation.

Oklahoma based LifeChurch has created a cyber congregation that allows participants to express their faith both individually and congregationally. The church was founded in 1996 in a dance studio. Since that time, using the Internet to broadcast live “worship experiences” around the world, LifeChurch has grown to 13 brick and mortar campuses and an Internet-based congregation with more than 21,000 virtual members. They broadcast 49 worship experiences during a week that include online messages, discussions, praise and worship music, and virtual resources (Lifechurch.tv, 2010). LifeChurch offers a virtual lobby where members “hang out” before and after services in an attempt to create an experience of community among their virtual users. Virtual LifeChurch congregates have the opportunity to volunteer and serve in a variety of ways. For example, they can go on virtual mission trips. On these missions, congregates meet in the virtual lobby for a time of prayer, then they log into MySpace and Facebook and search for opportunities to witness to their friends. After an hour on the secular sites, the LifeChurchers meet back in the virtual lobby to pray, (Biever, 2007). LifeChurch also has a virtual church in the online world Second Life (Biever 2007, Hutchings, 2007).

The Methodist Church (USA) developed one of the first online church services, which included the first 3D, virtual church service, called Church of Fools. Visitors to the site chose a cartoon parishioner, could explore the sanctuary, sit in the pews, look in the crypt, ring the church bell, and type in prayers (Church of Fools, 2010). The Church of Fools website logged 41,000 users in one single day (Hutchings, 2007). “The vitality and innovation that is taking place in religious organizations is driven by technology,” said Scott Thumma, a sociologist at the Hartford Institute for Religious Research (Biever, 2007 p.193). All of these church websites

provide users with a virtual place to express their faith through service and worship, in a new way.

Defining online church experiences

This study seeks to learn about individuals' expressions of faith through online Christian church services. While there are a plethora of religious websites, this study focuses on the lived experiences users have with online church worship, similar to that provided by LifeChurch. For this study, online church services are defined as an organized worship opportunity that mirrors or provides distance access to a traditional church.

Literature Review

Many scholars have focused on worship and its place in the act of expressing faith. The desire to express religious faith is as old as mankind (Haiman, 2003). The meaning of Christian worship must be articulated before it can be expressed (White 1971). Worship is a sacred act of communication with self, others and God (Burke, 1969). Worship involves a community of people (Davies, 1994). Sacred experiences are more than object and feeling. They are "quality," relational experiences between God and man. Worship is an attempt to break through the everyday life and discover overwhelming mystery, thereby producing a sense of wholeness, awareness of the grace of God, and a feeling of center and balance (Bellah, 1969). Worship is the acknowledgment of God's prominence in creating life and giving salvation. "In worship, men and women become aware of themselves as finite creatures on the one hand and as morally limited beings on the other" (Davies, 1994, p. 35). White (1971) noted that Christian worship focuses on God and the worshiper's experiences. "When we slight either, we are not talking about Christian worship any longer" (p. 38). The worshiper must understand the difference in the message and the media being used to express the message.

While many scholars have labeled the focus of the worship experience as internal/external/eternal communication, the ways individuals express faith by participating in worship is varied. In fact, often the expression of faith is less about worship and more about mindset. Historically, Protestants have expressed faith by seeking spiritual health and wholeness (Marty, 1993). Moody (1969) predicted that worship would become less ritualistic and more a reflection of society and cautioned that as expressions of faith change, worship without a focus on God is ultimately pointless. Archer (1969) argued that worshipers should discover personal revolution that leads to outward change. (Ammerman, 1997; Cimino and Lattin, 1998; Howard, 2010; Roof, 1999) point out that the use of technology and the use of everyday language in online worship are valuable because the individual worshiper is given more control of their worship experience. Howard (2010) further suggests studying online expressions of faith from the perspective of vernacular religion, which focuses on individuals' religious acts, beliefs, and actions instead of on the technology that mediates the worship experience. The literature shows there are many views of worship and expressions of faith. Several studies have focused less on explaining worship and faith expressions in the macro, and instead focus on faith expression and worship in the micro.

Ruan (2008) and Brown (2007) examined how laws require workplaces to accommodate individual's expressions of faith. Kiracofe (2010) found that teachers wearing religious garb as an expression of faith is permissible, as long as no health or safety issues are present. Researchers have also studied the marriage of religious expression through prayer and online breast cancer survivor support groups, and found that religious expression within computer support groups was beneficial in coping with the threatening ailment (Shaw, Han, Kim, Gustafson, Hawkins, Cleary, McTavish, Spingree, Eliason, and Lumpkins, 2007), while

Lieberman & Winzelberg (2009) found no such evidence. Cochrane (2009) looked at how artists express faith through their work and Madeson (2009) found that religious expression has become an issue of individual expression rather than that of congregational expression.

Given the many unique experiences of those who participate in worship and the lack of scholarly investigation into the phenomenon of online worship, this study seeks to understand the experiences of online churchgoers.

Methods

This paper seeks to understand the lived experiences of online churchgoers. To gain this understanding, the research was conducted from a paradigmatically qualitative perspective using the qualitative method of the long interview. A qualitative paradigmatic perspective requires specific methodological and evaluative principles. Ontologically, realities are multiple and socially constructed. “Individuals are active meaning makers, and the realities of any phenomenon are created by those who live the experience” (McMillan, Haley, Zollman-Huggler, Avery, Winchenbach, and Bell, 2007 p. 267 & Guba, 1990). This research acknowledges that each online churchgoer has lived a unique experience in expressing faith in an online church environment and seeks to learn about their experiences. These unique experiences, as well as all other experiences, are part of the life-world and shaped by stocks of knowledge at hand. These stocks are shaped both by socially constructed (i.e. what is passed down by culture, teachers, parents, etc.) and individually experienced events (Gurwitsch, 1974). “The stock of knowledge at hand forms the frame of reference, interpretation, and orientation for . . . life in the world of daily experiences . . .” (Gurwitsch, 1974, p. 119), such as online worship. Knowledge, a human construct, is a consequence of human activity (Gubba, 1990). The life-world of online churchgoers is both the conscious act of the individual expressing faith and the mental constructs

that have formed the worshiper's views of the worship experience (reality) (Gurwitsch, 1974). Paradigmatically, a qualitative research method should ensure participants can unreservedly communicate their "realities" (McMillan, *et al.*, 2007).

To access this reality, long interviews were used (See Appendix A). The long interview can "take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the category and logic by which he or she sees the world" (McCracken, 1990, p. 9). If conducted appropriately, interviews are epistemology subjective in qualitative research. In qualitative interviews, the researcher and the interviewer should be amalgamated into a monistic entity with the findings being the creation of their interaction (i.e. transcripts of the interview) (Gubba, 1990). "Qualitative methods are most useful and powerful when they are used to discover how the respondent sees the world" (McCacken, 1990, p. 21). Interviews are an appropriate data collection technique for inquiring about people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations, and constructs of reality (Punch, 2000).

Recruitment

This study relies on a snowball sample of individuals who have participated in online worship experiences. Snowball sampling is an effective way to identify online populations (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004; Witte, Amoroso & Howard, 2000). With snowball sampling, individuals who know of other individuals who share a characteristic of interest to the researcher refer them to the researcher (Waldorf, 1981). It is sometimes difficult to gain access to a group, even if they appear to have a high visibility. Once an access point is identified, snowball sampling allows researchers to study a given group (Waldorf, 1981). The access points for this study are three individuals who have attended different online worship services. Each contact point will be asked to contact others in their personal network who have

participated in online worship and who might be willing to participate in this study. Personal networks and friends are a way to contact a hidden population (Browne, 2005). Once individuals have been introduced to the researcher, interviews will be scheduled. Snowball sampling has been used in several published research studies and has proven to be an effective recruitment technique (Bhatagar & Ghose, 2004; Johnson, Kay, Bichard, & Wong, 2007; Johnson, Kaye, 2004; Kaye, 2007 & McMillan, 2010).

Procedures

Due to the lack of a geographically central location of participants in cyber worship, interviews were conducted via Skype, an online video chat service. Using online resources is an acceptable practice to “facilitate interviews with persons for whom a face-to-face interview was not easily possible and to enhance geographic diversity of participants” (McMillan, 2010, 822). Hussain & Griffiths (2009) conducted synchronous interviews via MSN Messenger. Chou (2001) used online chat rooms to facilitate both group and individual interviews of people suffering from online addiction. Given that this study is examining a phenomenon that occurs in an online environment, the use of online tools in data collection does not detract from the context and experience being studied (Hine, 2000 & Lee, 2009). Paradigmatically, synchronous Skype interviews have the potential to allow the interviewer to present grand tour questions and prompts (McCracken, 1990) in a way that provides the interviewee a platform to express their lived experience more completely than e-mail or text based interviews (i.e. asynchronous communication).

The interviews were 30 to 45 minutes and interviewees were able to tell their experience freely and openly, a primary goal of qualitative interviews (McCracken, 1990). The researcher conducted all interviews from his home office to provide as much consistency as possible. A

consent form (See Appendix B) was distributed to every participant prior to each interview. Participants returned the completed form via e-mail. They typed in their name and the date and acknowledged that by returning the form via e-mail they understood and consented to participate in the study. All consent forms will be kept for three years (McMillan, 2010). Once the consent form was returned, the interview commenced.

The Skype interviews were recorded using Call Recorder for Mac OS X / 2.3.10. Call Recorder adds a recording window to Skype for Mac and allows users to save all Skype video calls as QuickTime files. Once each interview was completed, a copy of the interview was converted to MP3 format and transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. While minimal foreseeable risks are present in participating in this study, all digital interview material and consent forms will be stored in the researcher's locked office on a password protected hard drive that is not remotely accessible, to protect the identity of participants. Printed interview transcripts and copies of consent forms will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the same office. The material will be kept for three years (McMillan, 2010).

Each interview was transcribed verbatim (McCracken, 1990) and the researcher reviewed each transcription prior to conducting additional interviews. Based on analysis of the prior interviews, slight changes were made to the discussion guide. This helped probe for additional life experiences of the online user (McCracken, 1990). The transcripts were analyzed through analytic induction to find "patterns, linkages, and plausible explanations" (Patton, 1990). "Analytic induction consists of scanning the transcriptions and other materials for themes and categories, developing a working schema from examination of initial cases, and then modifying and refining it on the basis of subsequent cases" (McMillan, et al., 2007, p. 267). "Qualitative rigor has to do with the quality of the observations made by the evaluator," Patton, 1990, p. 480).

Data that did not fit into the developing categories was examined to “expand, adapt, or restrict the original construction” (McMillan, et al., 2007, p. 267 & Patton, 1990). A diligent search was conducted until no more negative cases were found. These cases are reported in the finds, and are often the most interesting data collected (Patton, 1990). Perfect data pointing to one fact is unlikely, and given the unordered nature of human interaction and thinking, would be highly unlikely (Patton, 1990). No attempt was made to draw generalizable truths from the data. “Social phenomena are too variable and context-bound to permit very significant empirical generalizations” (Patton, 1990, p. 487).

Results

Several themes developed through the three interviews. While an insufficient number of interviews have been conducted to reach analytical redundancy, the available transcripts do provide initial themes and categories to begin to understand the experience of online churchgoers.

Substitute for traditional worship

Several themes pointed to the use of online worship as a flexible substitute for traditional worship, when going to the brick and mortar church was not an option. Everyone interviewed attended both traditional and online worship and mentioned regular church attendance as an important activity. The online worship experience was often used as an alternative to missing traditional church due to illness, being out of town, or due to issues surrounding children.

“. . . There are times when the children are under the weather and we should not take them to Sunday school or something like that. So, we stay home and it makes attending church services online a very good option for us.”

“It is so much easier some mornings when I do not want to fight with the kids to get them to go to church, or someone has woken up on the bad side, or someone is sick and stuff, I can just log online and join into church there.”

“If you are not able to attend because you are sick, because children are sick, you are on vacation and have access to the Internet, a variety of reasons, to feel free and attend service online.”

“If I was sick or something and was not able to go in person, I go online. I still felt like I had the same experience.”

Relaxing environment

In addition to themes of being an alternative to traditional worship, a theme of online worship providing a more comfortable, relaxing environment than traditional worship was also noted.

“I think it (online worship) is more relaxing. Watching it on my laptop in my living room on my couch is definitely a little more casual.”

“You just come as you are.”

Desires for connection and anonymity

The desire to make connections with others was a theme that developed throughout the interviews. However, this theme was experienced in different ways. While some worshippers found online worship to be an effective avenue for cautiously achieving connections, others felt traditional small group worship options were preferable. In both cases, these themes of connection were tied to finding a place in a large church.

“You can join in (to online worship) as much or as little as you want. It is kind of a good way to tip toe into the church without actually walking through the doors.”

“I don’t want to say they (traditional small groups) make my church experience, because it goes beyond that, but in a large mega church, you can easily . . . not meet anybody.”

While not a predominate theme, loneliness, the desire to connect with others, yet stay anonymous and avoid judgment, was one of the more interesting comments made. One individual experienced encountering feelings of judgment and pity when she attended traditional churches with her children and no husband. The anonymity of online church protects her from those perceived judgments.

“I have been to a lot of churches in my life, and especially going alone, you know, with three little kids, especially so close in age, you are either met with one of two reactions: you either get looks of pity from people like, ‘Oh my God that poor woman doing it all by herself,’ or you get the looks of disapproval, ‘Doesn’t she know where these kids are coming from,’ – popping them out like a Pez dispenser! It is a really uncomfortable experience because if you are not going with someone, there are not very many people that actually acknowledge you so you just kind of sit there alone, especially in the larger churches, you just really get to feeling alone, like you are just another face in the sea of faces.”

Speaking of online worship, *“You can be honest and not feel judged. That is one of the hugest pluses of church online. It is such a judgment free zone.”*

Social media and interactivity

The use of social media was a common practice in all worshiper’s online experiences, although the media was utilized in several different ways. In some instances, the church staff used Facebook and chat functions to reach worshipers. In other applications, worshipers used these functions to connect with other worshipers.

“He (the pastor) poses questions . . . on Facebook. He utilizes some of that stuff within his sermons the following week.”

Speaking of using social media during online worship, *“You can Facebook and Titter everything whenever it is live.”*

Speaking of using the social media tools on the online church website to connect with others, *“I usually try to, if I am watching church online. I will definitely try to participate . . . and get to know people.”*

“You have a little virtual person you can actually click on that will raise your hand so you can join in.”

Music and delivery

While a theme of enjoying live, contemporary worship was present, a negative view of the delivery of the music online was common. While taking part in singing in traditional worship was common, online worshipers did not participate in the singing.

Speaking of dislikes of attributes of online worship, *“I really just miss, with worship especially, the overall sound. I am a big sight, sound junkie. I love the lights, the fog, feeling the bass and the drums, feeding off the crowd’s frenzy, you know, whenever there is a really good Holy Spirit moment and stuff. You don’t have that, of course (online).”*

Speaking of participating in singing in online church, *“It definitely changes. I feel like I get a better experience actually attending in person. But I still, I still feel like, it is hard to explain. It is easier in person but at the same time I still feel the music really touches me and really speaks to me. The music is really awesome. They have a really good choice in music but in person, attending at the campus it makes it easier to worship. It is more comfortable for me. I think just standing and clapping.....I like to clap and sing and get real loud and stuff like that, but online, I really would feel uncomfortable doing that at home. Plus, my husband would probably think I am nuts.”*

“I have definitely, in recent years, taken a liking to a more modern contemporary praise and worship style.”

Online worship and children

In addition to the theme of not liking the delivery of the online worship, a theme of discontentment with online worship options for children was found. This theme was true for people with children and without.

Speaking of the traditional church, *“It has a great children’s program. Also, with my children, it is very important to me for them to go to Sunday school and for them to have that extra outlet to learn about God and interact in a variety of ways learning about God. That, at this point, can only be done if I physically take them to church as well.”*

Speaking of dislikes of online church, *“Number one, of course, is the Kids church. It is very, very hard, you know, that is something I am sure LifeChurch will eventually try to dive a little bit more into. It is going to be very, very hard because you are going to have to choose, unless you have more than one computer in the house, who gets to watch church. You cannot quite do a split window, kids watch yours, I am in my church leave me alone. You don’t have that baby-sitter option you would at an actual location, so to speak.”*

Connection to staff

Another common theme throughout the interviews was identification with the pastor and staff. Each interviewee mentioned the name of their pastor, or a former pastor, in their online worship experience.

“Well, the online, of course, they have one of the guys, his name is Brandon Donaldson, and he is actually the online pastor. He is the one that actually welcomes everybody.”

“Adam Hamilton, is the pastor of Church of the Resurrection and on Facebook, whether you are a friend of his personal account or, he actually exceeded the number of people he can be

friends with as an individual so he created a different kind of page where you can become a fan, which is strange, but that is the way he had to do it to get more people involved.”

“Pastor Craig has said before that our dress code is ‘please do” (laughing).”

Discussion

A variety of themes were found in this study, and until redundancy is reached, it is hard to extrapolate final conclusions. As interviews continue, new categories and themes will likely be identified while some existing categories and themes may disappear or be absorbed by larger, overarching ideas.

However, using the three interviews that have been inductively analyzed, it is possible to look at online worshipers’ experiences and existing literature to reach some conclusions. Much of the literature talked about faith expressions and worship being an act of communication between individuals, others, and God (Burke, 1969; Bellah, 1969). In contrast to the literature, a theme of individuals connecting with God was not found in the experiences of these online worshipers. A theme of individuals connecting with others was present, but often was superficial in online environments; however, this person-to-person connection is in line with literature that classifies worship as involving a community of people (Davies, 1994). White (1971) pointed out that worship is about man and God: however, God was not a theme in these online churchgoers experiences. Moody’s (1969) prediction that worship would become less ritualistic is supported by the themes of relaxed environments and convenience. The experiences of online worshipers in this study showed themes of comfort and convenience as lived experiences. This too is in contrast to previous literature concerning worship being about personal revolution that leads to change (Archer, 1969). Ammerman (1997) Cimino and Lattin (1998) Howard (2010) and Roof (1999) said that the use of technology gives worshipers more control over the worship

experience. Themes in this study suggest these worshipers are exercising their control and crafting a more tailor-made worship experience that is not focused on communication with God.

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