Chapter 5


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ABSTRACT

Churches have a long tradition using technology to grow their audience and to connect worshippers. Technologies used in Christian service are not even perceived as such: consider architecture, the organ, and light. Yet, faith-based organizations have always been critical of new technologies. The authors used design science research methodologies to develop an artifact of the Eucharist of a Catholic service. “Instant Church” is an interactive machine that guides visitors through the service and creates an individualized wafer with a laser-engraved QR-code that points to a random Tweet with a hate message that invites a moment of thought. Over 700 visitors saw that exhibit. A qualitative evaluation showed a high positive acceptance by users under 40 while older visitors had a negative perspective. The artifact proved to be a highly suitable tool to invite a critical discourse and at the same time serves as a learning tool about the service. Interactive intelligent solutions reach the generation of digital natives and enable the discourse on the relationship between technology and faith.

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INTRODUCTION: MOTIVATION AND CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.— Arthur C. Clarke. Third Law.

Technology and religion have been in a more or less close contact over the centuries. Often derided as evil, technology has always also served as a way to bring people to church. From architecture to the printing press, elaborate stained glass windows and complex organs to psychoactive substances, technological solutions have provided ways and means to provide spiritual guidance and bring to the church. The domains of spirituality, metaphysics and supernatural worlds gained a new quality in the age of digital media. (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 10) Technology per se has become a religion for many over the centuries and established religious practices, especially Christian churches have always strived to distance themselves from magical practices.

The interdependence between church and technology has always been a relevant driver how people perceived spiritual practice to increase church attendance as well as to maintain influence and uphold the power of the church. In parallel, technical development is also a strong inhibitor. “Thus, mediatization of religion may be considered a part of a gradual secularization: it is the historical process in which the media have taken over many of the social functions that used to be performed by religious institutions.” (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 11) Christian churches for example, experience a steady decline in membership. In Germany, in 2017 alone, 270,000 Catholics and 390,000 Protestants left one of the two big Christian churches, mainly based on demographic changes.

Fifty-four percent of the German population belong to one of the two big Christian churches in 2017, compared to 62 percent in 2005 (SZ, 2018). The main reasons for people to leave their church being alienation from faith as well as a lack of commitment to the church as an institution. (Riegel et al., 2018). German religious sociologists see no fault in the offerings of the church and find the reasons for a decline in socio-cultural changes, urbanization, individualization and the growing recreational offerings. American consultants to the church identify clear issues “Why Churches Stop Growing and Decline Into Impotence”, among them broken hospitality, neglect of the core mission that Jesus has given the church, comfort in the status quo, and others (Finkelde, 2016).

The diocese of Essen in cooperation with the University of Siegen investigated motivations for church exits since March 2017. Interviews conducted for this study reveal how active and former church members perceive the church today:

_The church needs to open up and invite modern ideas. God wants us to love everybody and lead our lives the way we choose to (Catholic, 41-60 years, Duisburg) – I do not need a parish festival with sausages, I want to learn about faith, but nobody has time for this (Catholic male, 41-60 years, Bochum)_

Leaving the church seems to be a drawn-out process, explains Riegel, driven by alienation, a loss of sense for the community, a growing disillusionment with the church, the disconnect between personal faith and the institution church, and others. Church taxation and scandals are often only the famous “final straw” (Qualbrink, n. d.).

The big churches are in denial of cultural changes and oblivious to the need for the spiritual guidance today’s world is looking for. People are looking for spiritual grounding and community. This explains why Buddhism as well as Islam and community-oriented sects that care for their community gain mem-