Chapter 8

Christian Community: Real and Virtual

“I link, therefore I am.”

William Mitchell

“You can pray for someone even if you don’t think God exists.”

Anonymous

8.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on Christian community. We start with a consideration of real Christian community, finding that it is unique because of the relationship that is expected to exist between members: this relationship is one of “love,” in a “fellowship” dictated by the common status of “believer in Christ.” Secular communities are broader in type, and do not necessarily have this bond underpinning. There is evidence that both secular and religious communities have largely broken down in Western cultures. Many have found that the computer and virtual communities that are emerging are actually assisting people to find community once again. Some of the helpful factors in kindling virtual communities are the “levelling” and organisational struc-
ture that virtual communities make possible. Increasingly, it appears that virtual communities are providing an alternative to conventional religious communities. Debbie Gaunt provides a useful comparison between six models of Christian community and virtual community. And while the possibilities of virtual Christian communities are exciting, they are limited in (1) the lack of physical presence within which to express the most primitive aspects of community and (2) lack of guarantee that the type of relationship is that “love” that flows from the mutual status in Christ.

One of the strengths of virtual communities is the “communication” and “interactive life” that underpins them. Pros and cons of virtual interaction have been identified in virtual communities of various domains, from business to social, to teaching and learning. General principles of successful interaction have been sought, as well as characteristics of virtual communities and the interactions supported. Parallels with face-to-face interactions extend even to malicious individuals who engage in “identity deception” to undermine a relationship and/or community. In this wealth of literature about virtual interaction, we find the interactions of Christian communities to have a special place. Isolating “congregational communities” from online theological debates, we find that one unique characteristic of the virtual Christian community is the aim of the interactions in that community. The interactions in “congregational communities” are for the sake of personal connectedness, and building community itself. To this extent, the most useful aspect of the virtual world is the extent to which it facilitates this “depth” of exchange, fosters trust, and provides an environment where personal “openness” is possible.

Presence is an issue to consider in virtual communities. The distinction between physical and virtual presence are useful to consider in the light of religious mandates to “meet together.” It is possible to physically meet and yet fail to “meet” in other ways, raising questions of whether a virtual community is even better than a physical gathering. Nevertheless, technology has a long way to go before adequately mediating physical presence. As more sophisticated virtual interaction becomes possible, it will be possible to tailor virtual interactions, so achieving the best of real world and virtual communities.

The objective of this chapter is to consider the nexus of real and virtual Christian communities. We want to point out some unique characteristics of Christian communities in both the real and
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