

The Virtual Church

Who says people have to worship in a building? Today more and more people are pointing and clicking their way to God from a home computer.

Ariel Santa Cruz loves going to church. He has a comfortable seat, stays focused on the sermon and enjoys the fellowship. But he doesn't have to leave his home computer desk. Like so many believers and seekers worldwide, he attends church on the Internet.

For Santa Cruz and many others, Internet church—or virtual, Web or cyber church—is the real thing. Virtual church maybe in its infancy and largely experimental, but some believe the Internet has the potential of being at the forefront of church growth in the next decade.

Will the “virtual experience” spark a new wave of interest in church? Could this even become the church of the future?

The church as a whole has never been eager to embrace changes, sometimes for good reasons. The idea of worship and fellowship online is enough to cause some, especially those grounded in traditional styles, to crash their spiritual hard drives.

All Eyes on i-Church

In its rawest form, Internet church is a webcast of a service, a Christian chat forum or an online prayer board. At its most innovative, it's a fully interactive experience.

“All churches need to have a strategy for the Internet because

people's spiritual needs do not fall into a neat slot," suggests Alyson Leslie, former pastor of i-Church (), a Web congregation based in the United Kingdom.

I-Church was set up as an experimental forum for 20-50 people to study the Bible and pray together online. But within weeks the church, fueled by publicity, mushroomed to 900 core members and 1,000 "inquirers" from around the globe. Evangelicals, charismatics, Anglicans and Roman Catholics all took part.

Leslie was overwhelmed. She advised the project's sponsor, the Anglican Church, to overhaul its Internet strategy so i-Church could cope with the response.

At a time when attendance is falling in many churches in Europe and North America, i-Church appears to be achieving what the traditional church at large has failed to do. It is opening the lines of communication and drawing the unchurched into a welcoming environment.

"Every time there is publicity about i-Church, it brings an avalanche of interest," Leslie explains. "People come with their questions, spiritual needs and hurts—all of them looking to the church for answers. We should see the Internet, in spiritual terms, as a continent that needs to be evangelized."

But is it really possible to have church online? It depends, Leslie suggests, on how "church" is defined.

"If you see 'church' as a building with programs at set times of the week, then Internet church is going to make you feel uneasy," she concedes. "But if you see church as people, then

it really does not matter where they meet and interact. Church, in my opinion, is about community, and i-Church offers people the chance to join a Christian community.”

Fellowship online is often deep and dynamic, Leslie adds.

“People quickly get past the social niceties and into deep spiritual conversations, sharing their spiritual longings and struggles,” she says. “You find that people are actually very quickly ministering to one another ... giving of themselves to address each other’s hurts and questions about faith. I-Church has been a true blessing to hundreds.”

Much further afield, Web church is opening doors for the gospel in the Islamic world.

“The Holy Spirit is at work,” says the leader of an Arabic virtual-church project in the Middle East, not named for security reasons. “Almost every person in the Middle East can easily access the Internet. This is our opportunity now, as the church, to enter every home.”

In a region where persecution is reality, Web church provides a place of refuge for Christians to meet and worship together in safety. “You could call [Internet church] the church of the 21st century,” the leader told Charisma. He adds that it also provides an anonymous forum for Muslims to explore the Christian faith.

Cyber Saints, Virtual Visitors

In Western culture, however, do Internet churches pander to

those who won't make the effort to attend the traditional church?

"I don't see it as a cop-out," responds Stephen Goddard, co-editor of webzine Ship of Fools, which launched the world's first 3-D, interactive virtual church, called Church of Fools ([http://www.shipoffools.com](#)).

"We're concerned that many of the people coming to Church of Fools are not [finding] meaningful church offline," Goddard says.

Lack of funding caused Church of Fools to suspend its interactive services in September 2004, though logging on and visiting the church is still possible. Its pilot run, however, attracted thousands of visitors from around the globe. Guest preachers included well-known U.S. evangelical Tony Campolo. At its peak, Church of Fools drew 41,000 visitors during a 24-hour period.

According to Goddard, more than 50 percent of Church of Fools' visitors are under age 30, and 60 percent are male—a significant statistic, considering that young men are among the least likely to attend traditional churches. Describing itself as "an attempt to create holy ground on the Net," Church of Fools incorporates groundbreaking technology.

Each visitor controls his or her own 3-D animated character. Characters occupy pews, kneel to pray, raise their hands, sit, stand, move around, introduce themselves to others, shout "Amen!" and interact in other ways.

Church "wardens" monitor services and "smite," or log out,

unruly visitors. One was hastily removed after he logged on as Satan and invaded the pulpit.

Wardens, however, are sensitive toward those unfamiliar with church etiquette. Most visitors seek a worshipful experience, says Church of Fools leader Simon Jenkins.

“At first, many people thought the idea sounded ridiculous,” Jenkins told Charisma. “But when people visited the church, they were surprised by how reverent and authentic the experience is.

“The first time I entered Church of Fools, I thought, Wow, this really is church,” Jenkins recalls. “Someone nudged my character and said, ‘We should pray.’ People form circles to pray with one another. The Holy Spirit is right there.”

Regular attendees were clearly disappointed when soaring costs forced Church of Fools’ high-tech worship services offline.

“This is the kind of inspiration we need to bring the message of the gospel to a generation that is often wounded by and suspicious of the traditional church,” wrote Hugh from Augusta, Georgia, on the church’s Web site.

“In today’s world, the hardest thing for Christianity is getting people into its churches,” commented Nik from the United Kingdom. “Here you offer people the chance to sample a little of the feeling of tranquility and peace ... [upon] entering a place of worship.”

Goddard—who says he is hopeful services will be back online

soon—acknowledged that the site would need “significant investment to make it happen.”

The funding dilemma raises an important question: Is Internet church financially viable and sustainable?

It cost tens of thousands of dollars to launch Church of Fools and operate it for the three-month trial period (sponsored by the U.K. Methodist Church).

“At some point, I expect it to be a lot more affordable,” Jenkins says. “But right now the latest interactive technology is very expensive.”

Upgrading Web Worship

Several well-known charismatic preachers in the United States also are experimenting with Web church. T.D. Jakes beams live webcasts of services via his ministry’s Web site () and averages 3,480 viewers per month, according to his ministry, The Potter’s House.

“This is more than a fad. Our Web services are here to stay,” insists Tanisha Pace, a spokesperson for the ministry.

Since April 2003, Argentinean evangelist Sergio Scataglini, who is based in Indiana, has pastored a Spanish-speaking Web congregation of 100 international members. Congregants log on from as far away as Argentina, Spain, Peru, Uruguay and Mexico.

“It is not about staring at a static computer screen,” Scataglini explains. “Everything about Internet church is built on relationships. Church is the fellowship of believers, and relationships take priority over distance.”

Scataglini’s virtual church, ComunioNet ([comunio.net](#)), is well-organized. It includes 24 cell groups, the leaders of which are trained in discipleship. The groups meet regularly online. Some of them also convene in person.

“This is real church,” Scataglini told Charisma. “Every step of the church can be fulfilled through the Internet. We baptize believers and take communion together.”

Baptism through the Internet? Scataglini presided over an actual online baptism as church members on another continent immersed the candidate. He believes Internet church is “the next natural step.”

I-Church’s Leslie agrees.

“God will use any and every means to reach people,” she says, “and the Internet can reach millions in their own homes. The Holy Spirit is present at Internet church—and He will do something wondrous.”

Julian Lukins is a writer based in California. He and his wife, Becky, still prefer to attend a traditional church.