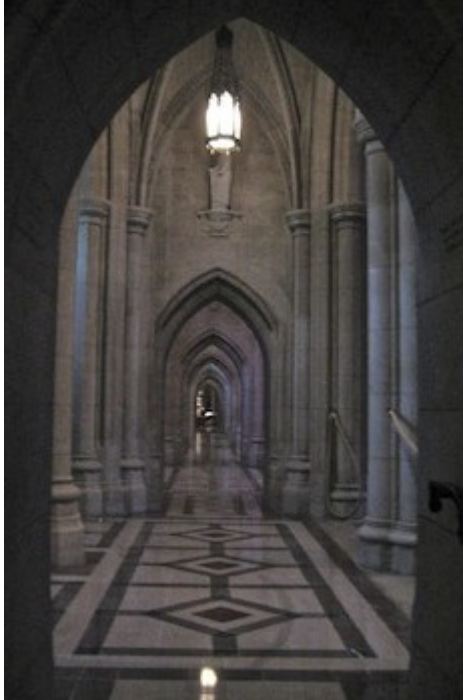


The spiritual nature of social media

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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This week, [Bruce Reyes-Chow announced](#) that he's planting an on-line Presbyterian Church. A curious former professor, who is not involved in social media at all, heard about it and asked me, "What would that look like? How would that work?"

His question itched for something more than just an explanation of the mechanics of an on-line church. It was like he wanted to know, "Is this possible? Can the Holy Spirit move in this fashion?"

As people who worship and pray with [Koinania](#), [1PSL](#), the [Virtual Abbey](#), and other communities can attest, Christians find a wealth of conversation, resources, challenge, and spiritual sustenance on-line. And now that the technology has grown up, we've been entangled in one another's lives for a few years. I do not worship regularly with an on-line church, but I pray the hours with Virtual Abbey and my on-line community forms and informs me. Pastors often

need a place to worship and find spiritual solace, outside of the congregations they serve. Recently, when my friend [Lia Scholl](#) asked me where I found support, I surprised myself by answering with a Twitter hashtag ([#unco12](#)).

So let's get back to my professor's question... *How would that work?* What are the benefits of on-line community? I'm most active on Twitter ([@CarolHoward](#)), so my responses will reflect that corner of the ever-growing social media world.

•**The community stays present at odd hours.** While we meet, worship and pray with one another one hour a week in our brick and mortar structures, on-line communities can be with us around the clock. Right now, I'm writing this at 5:00 a.m. Prayers crowd my thoughts as I read about a friend who's in the hospital with her son. I keep flipping from this blog screen to the Twitter site, to watch for updates.

•**The community has no geographical boundaries.** Often, when I'm up early in the morning, I'm talking to people in New Zealand or visiting with night owls in California. I have met people from all over the world who have many of the same passions and interests. I love that the miles between us have not kept us from learning from one another.

•**The community is large and diverse.** You can easily get on a social media site and connect with only like-minded people. But when you're intentional about it, it's also easy to build a diverse community. When I have a question or I'm struggling with something in my writing, I love being able to ask a wide-range of people what they think about an issue. I'm always challenged to see other perspectives when my conversation partners include people from varying ages, ethnicities, theological viewpoints, income levels, and sexual orientations.

•**The community can be more authentic.** When visiting Koinania church on Second life, I asked those gathered: "Do you feel like the avatar can be like a mask? Can people get to know the *real* you?"

Someone laughed and answered, "You don't think that people wear masks on Sunday morning?" They further explained that when they're on Second Life, no one was judging them by what they looked like, they could be more honest, and so it felt more

authentic to them.

I could go into the negative things as well—how people use on-line content to vilify pastors or ordination candidates. Incivility feels heightened. I often read blog comments and think, *I bet this person would never say this to my face*. And of course, we always need to work to keep lessening the digital divide.

But for the most part, I'm thankful for our on-line lives together. And I'm excited as these worshiping communities keep forming.

What have you gained from on-line worship and community? Do you worship with a particular group? Do you find support through a network? How has it impacted your life? What are the negative aspects of it?