Virtual worship: A theological challenge

by [Mark U. Edwards](#) in the [December 6, 2000](#) issue

"There is no There there," said Gertrude Stein about Oakland, California. "There is a different there there," say I, an Oaklandite by birth, about virtuality. "Virtual" presence differs from "real" presence in propinquity—time, place and relationship—as well as vividness and interactivity. The technology of virtual presence simulates "being there"; it holds out the promise of presence on demand—and thereby demands that we do some careful thinking about presence. Consider "virtual worship."

One of the more professional virtual worship sites, www.zchurch.com, a ministry of Bethel Temple in Evansville, Indiana, greets you with an animated cartoon map of a small community, a forthright and disarming evocation of virtual place. Each cartoon house may be clicked, taking the visitor to "interactive worship," video archives, prayer requests, marriage counseling, interactive e-mail cards, women's and men's chat rooms, personal testimonies, a community center for discussion groups, Christian education and so on. A click on the cartoon river, for example, leads to a statement on whether you need to be baptized. A click on the garage allows for downloading "plug-ins" that support the virtual experience—shockwave/flash, real player G2 and up-to-date browsers.

All in all, Zchurch offers a highly polished interface, as good as the better commercial sites—which is another way of saying that although this is the state of the art, the art remains crude. You have to rely heavily on your imagination to generate a sense of being there.

Zchurch broadcasts live once a week, and the virtual worshiper can participate in "real time"—a fascinating retronym, like acoustic guitar or dial telephone. But you needn't be "live." You can "join" worship at any time with a click on the play button on the "interactive worship" page. A video from the previous worship service comes streaming downline to a 3x2 inch TV window on the screen. Video requires a large

pipe (that is, bandwidth), but most of us have only a garden-hose-sized connection to the Net. Picture quality is sacrificed when the pipe is small, so the virtual worshiper experiences a series of small, jerky stills rather than a flowing video. The sound quality is also less than high fidelity (though that may not differ from some "real" churches' audio systems).

Although virtual worship is primitive now, the potential is clear. As the pipe gets larger, videos on the Web will soon match the sound and video quality of broadcast worship services. Vividness will increase, but a completely enveloping experience must await video goggles and the sense-reproducing body suits predicted by futurologists. (Don't hold your breath; it will take much time and money to develop effective body suits. Some knowledgeable observers doubt that the complete simulation of embodied experience is possible short of plugging directly into the nervous system, if then.)

Zchurch does better on interactivity than on vividness. With one click, you can access the hymn texts and sing along with the "live" audience—another retronym that we've long become comfortable with, thanks to stereo systems and television. You can write in the "guest book" and read other visitors' comments. You can look up verses in the Bible, consult a Bible dictionary, make prayer requests and join e-mail discussion groups. You can even click on "donation" and tithe like the live audience, over a secure server like those of the commercial sites—a nice commingling of God, Mammon and technology. According to an article in the March 17-19 *USA Weekend*, Net worshipers find the services meaningful and fulfilling. But even so, we must remember that they are not "really" there; they are "virtually" there, and that difference raises questions.

I feel a need to rub elbows with fellow Christians, kneel at a communion rail, taste the bread and wine. But others may not. In the virtual church the worshipers can be literally spread out around the world and "join" the congregation when they choose to click the play button. In what ways does the loss of propinquity change community? Does the change matter, either to God or the worshiper?

And what about the sacraments, a crucial element of worship for many Christians? If the Eucharist is seen as a memorial, a means to encourage recollection of Christ's sacrifice, then a virtual memorial may do. But for those who believe in the real presence in the Eucharist, no virtual experience can substitute, not even a simulation of the touch, taste and smell produced by virtual-reality body suits. And

what about baptism? Is belief sufficient even if the water is virtual?

For most Christians, technology can add welcome new means for evangelization and catechesis. But virtual worship challenges us to think deeply about theological first principles. Christians agree that the body of Christ is not confined to time or space. But it is not virtual; it is transcendent.