

Virtual real presence

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [May 28, 2014](#) issue



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A child tore off a piece of bread and fed it to her mother, saying, “This is for you, because God loves you.” The mother took the morsel into her mouth, swallowed it, and promptly posted news of the feeding on Facebook.

The mother’s report wasn’t a disrespectful act, born out of a short attention span or the urge to disrupt a service through the vanities of social media. The post was part of her worship; she was sharing the beauty of that sacred moment with her community.

The worshipers surrounded her, even though her daughter was the only other person in the room. They celebrated communion, even though the walls enclosing them were not constructed of cold limestone and lacked the glimmers of stained glass. The mother and daughter fed one another with the consecrated bread of life, even though the minister had never broken their particular loaf. They joined in a chorus of prayer, even though the only voices reverberating in the room were their own. The mother and daughter prayed with Extravagance, an online congregation of the United Church of Christ.

Of course, this sacred moment may cause confusion for some. Can a church or spiritual community form online? I posed the question to Meredith Gould, a sociologist who wrote *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways*. Gould has led prayer and convened chats for church leaders on Twitter from the early days of that medium.

“If digital technology has taught us anything, it’s that how and when people form groups of any size is not determined by location,” Gould said. “Sociologists have known this theoretically, but 21st-century technology in general and social media especially have given us empirical evidence of this truthiness. We now have abundant proof that meeting face-to-face is not a necessary prerequisite for encounters to morph into relationships that will in turn lead to communities—small groups joined by shared values, beliefs, and intentions. This seems to be true for SBNR [spiritual but not religious] types as well as those whose faith is deeply anchored in the institutional church.”

Now that online community is possible, and people are looking to their computers, tablets, and phones for those sacred moments, how are churches responding? Members of Christ’s body have routinely carried the gospel to foreign lands and cultures. Machetes in hand, they forged through jungles. Steering in hollowed-out canoes, they journeyed to distant regions. So isn’t it time to explore the digital horizons?

Jo Hudson, the gathering pastor of Extravagance, sounds like an explorer, exhilarated by the fact that the community isn’t trapped by geography. “Our space is different,” she explained. “A lot of online churches come from a land-based community, but we don’t have a land-based population.” Instead of live-streaming a service from an existing church, or launching a Facebook site with members who worship in the same sanctuary on Sunday mornings, the Extravagance community gathers people across the country by using different digital platforms.

Extravagance usually meets on Facebook, because so many people are already active there. The host sends out an invitation to a retreat, or to *lectio divina*, or to a prayer vigil. At the designated time, people from across the country go to the Extravagance Facebook page. The host will offer a question, a prayer, a scripture, or a song and invite the worshipers to reflect.

For instance, the host might ask, “Where is your holy space?” to which people respond by showing pictures of the place where they worship in their homes or a landscape that makes them feel spiritually alive. Then the host generates a discussion by replying and asking more questions.

Hudson sees a surprising honesty on social media. In the midst of the give-and-take of needing, caring, lamenting, and hearing one another, bonds begin to form. People recognize names and hear each other’s stories.

Hudson sees herself as “beta-testing” this kind of worshiping community. She’s exploring what platforms people will engage with and what formats will interest people the most.

“We’re all trying to figure out how to do church differently,” Hudson observed. “Everybody is thinking about this. How do we start new church plants? How do we start worshiping communities? How do we do bivocational ministry?” Hudson sees digital ministry as part of that conversation.

Hudson also understands the many questions and challenges ahead. For instance, what might membership mean for an online community? How does a loose gathering of people become a church, according to UCC polity? They can have communion by inviting people to prepare bread and wine and then eat it at the same time, but they’re not sure how they will celebrate baptisms. Will the community need to gather physically a couple times a year in order to baptize people or receive them into membership?

The community engages these questions with excitement. “We shouldn’t be afraid of these things,” Hudson said. “We should explore them and talk about them.”