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Multisite Churches

Creating Community from the Offline to the Online

Alessandra Vitullo

Abstract

This article – framed within digital religion studies – analyzes the online religious activities of a non-denominational Christian multisite church, LifePoint Church (LPC). A multisite church is a church with a central location that serves as a hub or production center for the church's activities and service contents, which are distributed to multiple sites in different locations through video or webcasts. LPC is an international multisite church: it has five campuses: three in the United States, one in Bangkok, and another one in Brussels. The LPC Brussels campus serves as a case study to observe how communication technologies, in particular the Internet, are adopted by both pastors and members to recreate the same 'sacramental environment' across the five churches. Through online observation, interviews, and questionnaires, this research reveals two different usages of the Internet made by LPC. One usage is public, official, informative and formal, and is promoted by the Church's leadership; the other is unofficial and is characterized by private and intimate communication among the Church's members. The article will analyze in depth how the congregants create this informal communication, which intensifies group solidarity, members' virtual religious practice, and group identity.

Keywords

Digital religion; Multisite church; Christianity; Internet; Virtual communities

1 Introduction

In today's cities, traditional sacred places still exist: cathedrals, churches, synagogues and mosques are integral parts of the urban landscape. The novelty lies in the other forms of 'postsecular

sanctuaries' (Rosati 2012)¹ in which it is possible to create religious and transcendental experiences in a not strictly traditional way. Taking into account the approach put forward by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, places become sacred as a consequence of human praxis of consecration, such as the output of ritual and its work in specific historical circumstances. In this perspective, nothing intrinsically sacred exists; places are *rendered* sacred by human acts of sanctification or, more accurately, by ritual acts of consecration (Smith 1987).

This article analyzes how a religious community can delimit and identify a sacred space within a virtual environment, and how the Internet can be a place where people can practice their religious values, join their religious community, and experience the transcendence.

Supported by the theoretical and methodological approaches developed by Campbell (2005, 2010), I highlight how the members of a multisite church, LifePoint Church (LPC), active on three continents, can modulate their use of the Internet in various ways to create their communal sacred place. With a special focus on the campus in Brussels, the article compares the official communication on LPC's website with the unofficial religious communication that occurs among members in private Facebook groups. Finally, these multipurpose usages of the Internet will question the definition of the Internet as a 'sacramental' space, as developed by Campbell (2005).

2 Theoretical Framework

Over the past thirty years, scholars have investigated religious groups and their activities on the Internet, observing which aspects of traditional religious practices can be translated online and how new digital technologies can reshape and influence religious communication and behaviors. This new interdisciplinary field of study – coined 'digital religion' – aims to analyze how religious practices, discourses, and engagement are embedded and interconnected in online and offline contexts.

As Campbell and Vitullo (2016) demonstrate, the initial research within this paradigm can be understood as the descriptive stage on which scholars documented and examined different groups as online religious communities (O'Leary & Brasher 1996). In stage two, scholars moved to the

¹ Rosati (2012) introduces the notion of 'postsecular sanctuary' to indicate conventional and non-conventional sacred places in our contemporary social landscape, such as civil mausoleums, monuments to leaders of the nation, memorials to the victims of wars, and those commemorating fundamental moments in the life of a community. These places usually function as sacred places and often satisfy nearly all the criteria that make a space a sacred place, with the only exception being that they do not reflect a transcendent dimension. All these sanctuaries, be they religious-traditional or civic-political, are part of the modern landscape, and they make possible the experience of profound power that transcends the self and places the individual in relation to ultimate aims.

categorization of these groups by identifying common characteristics regarding how community was performed and how members functioned online (Hadden & Cowan 2000). Then, in the third stage, scholars began to recognize that offline religious communities were using digital platforms and technologies to serve their members and enhance their ministry work (Dawson & Cowan 2004). Current research tends to concentrate on the intersection of religious communities' online and offline practices and discourses (Campbell 2010; Cheong & Poon 2009; Noomen et al. 2011).

Following the evolution of this field of study, Campbell formulated a theoretical and methodological approach that provides a useful heuristic instrument to further analyze the interaction of religion, media, and community. First, it offers a theoretical definition of the Internet *as a sacramental space* (Campbell 2005). The Internet is conceptualized as an environment in which certain practices can be carried out, be they individual (i.e., connecting a person with a larger community of shared faith online), communal (i.e., affirming or building communal religious identity and cohesion), or informational (i.e., seeking specific religious information or utilities). For my empirical analysis, I will consider only a part of this definition, namely that which recognizes some virtual environments as spaces set apart for religious practice (i.e., to pray, to share religious communication and values). This conceptualization is an effort to adapt Durkheim's definition of the social construction and function of sacred spaces (2013 [1912]) to the timeless and spaceless nature of virtual realities.

Rosati (2015) argues that in postsecular societies, religions can manifest themselves in new sacred places and in unusual forms and *sanctuaries* (Rosati 2012), while maintaining one and the same 'elementary grammar'. Following Rosati's understanding, sacred places have specific functional properties that can be viewed as a stable grammar: 1) they orient congregants by mirroring or representing on earth a more perfect and ultimate realm conceived of as lying beyond the terrestrial domain; 2) they reflect or evoke a natural divinity, immanent or transcendent, thereby providing a symbolic reference to something more and something desirable; 3) they are a point of encounter between the mundane and the transcendent orders; and 4) they manifest the presence of a cult object, image or idol that symbolizes and embodies the divine presence at the sacred place. Certain places become sacred in specific historical circumstances as a consequence of human practices of consecration. This consecration separates these places from other spaces of daily life, giving them a characteristic 'atmosphere' that is perceived as soon as the threshold between the

mundane and the sacred is crossed.² It is up to empirical research to establish whether the ‘traditional grammar of sacred places’ still works for new forms of postsecular sanctuaries:

Daily religious practice in postsecular cities can ‘take place in quite unexpected’ places, and the task of research is to investigate the logic of these new places and their related practices: domestic altars and televised liturgies, faith-based organizations and chat rooms on the Internet, ‘invented religions’ [...], on-line religion [...], multi-faith and meditation halls [...]. Are all these phenomena changing the grammar of sacred places? Can a sacred place exist in *cyber space*? (Rosati 2015, p. 66; emphasis in original)

As Campbell (2005) observes, using the Internet as a ‘sacramental space’ can foster a number of effects. Religious groups can reinforce their identity or a particular set of beliefs or rituals. Members can build their group’s narrative by encouraging one another in their shared convictions and through supportive discussions. Such network-supporting narratives allow members to see online communities as places where people with similar experiences will be accepted and where care will be provided for members in ways unavailable to them offline. These communities use the Internet as a support structure, facilitating their personal and spiritual growth.

Drawing on Campbell’s insights, this contribution investigates how users consider the Internet as a place consecrated for ritual and religious practices. To this end, it provides a concrete example of how the ‘atmosphere’ and ‘threshold’, to use Rosati’s terms (2015), are created virtually by religious groups online to foster new forms of spiritual networking and practices. Furthermore, the methodological approach formulated by Campbell (2010) – the Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) – is fruitfully used for the analysis of the social construction of these virtual sacramental spaces. By applying the RSST approach, it becomes possible to examine how religious groups negotiate the boundaries of sacred spaces in the experience of moving between offline and online settings for religious practices.

RSST arises from the Social Shaping of Technology theory (MacKenzie & Wajcman 1985), which frames technology as a social process. According to this approach it is not the character of a particular technology that determines its use and the outcome of its use (Ellul 1964). Rather, social groups can shape technologies to suit their purposes. Campbell (2010) points out that, unlike SST, RSST gives an account of the specific conditions that occur when technology is used according to

² Thresholds, gates and doors, as well as columns and pillars, are key examples of symbolic links between the sacred and the mundane. The need to pass through a threshold to reach a sacred place endows that place with its own characteristic ‘atmosphere’. Griffero (2010) highlights how the concept of atmosphere – which penetrates our social life far beyond the climatic dimension – refers to emotional spaces that have a transcendent power, that are not merely external subjective projections of inner sentiments, but are, rather, semi-things, having, in Durkheimian terms, a *sui generis* nature.

religious values and aims. The strength of the SST approach resides in the fact that it goes beyond the social determinism that sees technology as a supra-individual force determining human action (Aupers & Houtman 2010). Similarly, RSST suggests that a technology is shaped by the setting in which it is introduced and by the agents who utilize it. The community, in turn, is changed through the adoption of a new technology. Thus, users tame technologies in ways that enable them to fit more neatly into the routine of daily life; in other words, they engage in a process of ‘domestication’ of these technologies, trying to make them fit with “the moral economy of the household” (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992).

In this case ‘moral economy’ is used to describe the intersection of moral beliefs and economic practices. Therefore, domesticating a technology means making choices about the meaning and practical benefits of using that technology within a space connoted by symbolic and transcendental values:

By members choosing to come together into a shared space, be it physical or ideological space, they create a moral economy that requires them to make common judgment about the technologies they will appropriate or reject and rules of interaction with these, transferring symbolic meaning onto these choices. (Campbell 2010, p. 58)

Observing virtual religious communities through RSST’s lens allows scholars to focus on how religious practices can be adapted to new technologies, examine how religious meanings can be translated in a digital language, and analyze how technological and theological decision-making processes are involved in a religious group’s efforts to construct its narrative and identity.

Having clarified the methodological and theoretical approach, it is now possible to proceed with the analysis of the new virtual religious environment introduced in this article: multisite churches.

3 LifePoint Church: Defining a Multisite Church, Redefining a Sacramental Space

As Campbell and DeLashmutt (2013) explain, a multisite church is a church with a central location that serves as a hub or production center for the church’s activities and service contents, which are distributed to multiple sites in different locations through video or webcasts. As such, the church forms a network of congregations that aims to replicate the worship experience of the home church, combining video, live worship, and/or interaction with service facilitators. Because multisite churches are often enterprises driven by and dependent on technology, they raise interesting

questions about how technology can transform religious practices and how technology can be shaped by users to pursue religious values. The following discussion draws on a specific case study, LifePoint Church (LPC), a special model of multisite church whose campuses are located on three different continents (North America, Europa and Asia).

LPC was founded at the beginning of the twentieth century in Smyrna, Tennessee, under the name The First Baptist Church of Smyrna. Over the years, the church progressively grew in size, and larger facilities were needed to accommodate the increasing number of congregants. In 2000, instead of building a bigger church, the senior pastor decided to convert it into a multisite church.

The idea of establishing international campuses was rooted in LifePoint's missionary goal of multiplying churches in 'post-Christian' or 'non-Christian' countries, attracting secularized younger generations and educating them to be new missionaries around the world (Hood 2013). Currently LPC has five campuses: the central church in Smyrna; two more nearby in Tennessee; and two abroad: one in Bangkok and one in Brussels.

For my research I have chosen the Brussels campus as the lens through which to study how the Internet influences the religious identity of a church's members by creating a narrative that portrays a cohesive online-offline international community. LifePoint Church Brussels (LPCB) was planted in 2012 by a pastor from Smyrna. The campus is located in the eastern suburbs of Brussels, on the fourth floor of a building used for commercial activities, so the church is unrecognizable from the outside. The lack of a denomination, recognizable sacramental symbols, and specific rituals is a predominant characteristic of these new models of church. The lack of clear religious references apparently allows them to attract people from heterogeneous religious backgrounds. Moreover, their intensive engagement with new technologies appeals to younger generations (Greenblatt & Powell 2007).

4 Methodology

The choice to investigate in detail the international campus in Brussels arose from the assumption that the great distance between the campus and the central church would require extensive use of media technology to construct a shared virtual sacramental space. All information about LPCB was collected during a year of regular visits to the community. The ethnographic work used participant observation to examine the community's worship activities and provide the data for a qualitative-interpretive analysis of LPCB religious life (Tracy 2013). Unstructured interviews were conducted with the senior pastor Pat Hood and with the pastor of the Brussels campus, Len Phegley.

Moreover, I undertook a two-year-long observation (from 2014 to 2016) of the LPC's online activities, observing official communication and members' interaction on LPC's websites and social networks – especially on Facebook and Twitter. To better understand how members of LPC use and consume the Church's online religious communication and to effectively analyze the LPC virtual religious experience, quantitative data were collected through questionnaires submitted to members of the Brussels campus. The survey sought to highlight the religious, biographical, and cultural backgrounds of the members and their Internet usage related to the activities of the Church.

5 LPC Official and Public Communication Online: Centralizing Authority

The interview with the senior pastor reveals how the central church in Smyrna plays a role in controlling and coordinating all of LPCB's activities, from selecting pastors for the campuses to choosing the Sunday sermons to deciding which songs are to be played during the services. Pastor Hood coordinates LPCB's activities through e-mail, video conferencing, and occasional visits to the Brussels campus.

The same centralized structure is also immediately apparent when observing the Church's presence online. Indeed, the homepage of LPC in Smyrna is the exclusive platform via which the user is redirected to the webpages of the other campuses. The structure and graphic design of all webpages are administered by one webmaster from Smyrna, and the Smyrna webpage is the most complete and updated of all of them. This is the only church offering streaming services, recorded services, podcasts of sermons, and e-Bible readings. The YouTube channel is the same for all campuses, but the majority of the videos are recorded at the church in Smyrna.

However, social media communication allows campuses to be more autonomous in the articulation of their online presence. Each campus can freely administer its social media profile,³ but still maintains a uniform design. Throughout 2015 I observed the online interaction among Church members on two of the most popular social networks, Facebook and Twitter. The intensity of the interaction was measured in terms of the number of subscribers of the social pages, the quantity and quality of the content documented on these pages (e.g., how many 'status' or 'tweets'

³ The official LPC Smyrna Facebook page was obviously the first one to be opened (in 2009), and it has the most subscribers (more than 5,000). Four more pages have been created in the following years: LifePoint Church, Stewarts Creek Campus (c. 800 subscribers); LifePoint Church Brussels (c. 1,000 subscribers); LifePoint Church Bangkok Campus (c. 800 subscribers); and LifePoint Church Murfreesboro Campus (c. 300 subscribers). Each campus also has a Twitter and an Instagram account.

are posted every day), and the feedback received from these activities, i.e., the ‘likes’ and comments on Facebook and the ‘retweets’ and ‘preferences’ on Twitter.⁴

As observed for the website as well as for social media, LPC’s communication is still focused on the promotion of the pastoral activities of the Church, reinforcing the narrative of the centrality and diffused presence of the Smyrna church. The effort to maintain an official and institutional presence of LPC online is confirmed by the words of the senior pastor himself:

The website is the key to getting the world – marketing if you want – but the Internet should not be a substitute, because when you become a Christian you are part of a community and to be part of a community means to have a life together. The Internet, however, is isolation and not direct involvement with people. You just stand there looking at your screen. The Internet should not be a substitute, but a supplement.

Cross referencing data collected during the online observation with the outcome of the questionnaires can help to better understand what religious use the members make of this official and formal communication online – especially members located at a great distance, such as those at the Brussels campus.

To interpret these results it is important to know that half of the LPCB members interviewed⁵ arrive at the Church after looking for a church online, for example by typing into Google “English-speaking church”. The percentage of people who heard about the existence of LPCB online is about the same as the percentage of people who came thanks to word of mouth among familiars and friends. This suggests that, because of the campus’s recent foundation and lack of visibility, its online presence is an essential tool for supporting and promoting its very existence. Moreover, on the campus there are thirteen different nationalities and eight different Christian denominations.⁶ More than half of the respondents are young adults between the ages of 18 and 30, so the majority of the members are young people, who are usually familiar with new technologies. Generally speaking, one can say that the Internet turns out to be an important gateway to the campus,

⁴ For example, the Smyrna Facebook page has more than 5,000 members and the administrators publish an average of three posts per day. The feedback received by these posts ranges from 3 to 80 likes per post, and the comments are rarely more than 3. On the branch campuses’ Facebook pages, the volume of interactions and posts is even less, which is in part due to the smaller number of subscribers.

⁵ Of an average of 60 people who attend the church, 37 responded at the questionnaire.

⁶ According to the results of the survey, 32.4% of the attendees come from the United States, 13.5% are from Belgium, 8.1% are from United Kingdom, and the remaining 46% comprises 13 different nationalities. Participants belong to 8 different Christian denominations (8 people have defined themselves as non-denominational Christians; 6 referred to themselves generically as Protestants; 6 people identified as Baptist; 4 as Presbyterians; 1 each as Lutheran, Methodist, and from the Free Church of Scotland; 3 as Catholics; 2 as Orthodox; and finally, 3 people claimed not to have had a religious ‘background’ before approaching LPCB).

attracting a young, heterogeneous religious community that is not rooted in a specific cultural or geographical context.

The analysis of the questions concerning the LPCB members' online religious activities shows that 75.6% of respondents claimed to visit the website, but only 29.7% of them indicate doing so at least once a week (the rest of the participants indicate a lower frequency). Moreover, only 17.2% of the website users affirmed that they find online all they need for their religious experience, while 58.8% of the members said they need physical participation in the Church's religious activities. Regarding social networks, 45.9% are regular social media users and follow LPC's activities as part of their regular social media use, while 37.8% use social media exclusively to stay updated about Church events. The rest of the members subscribe to the electronic newsletter to receive information.

Combining my online observations and the results of the questionnaire could easily lead to the conclusion that, although the Church offers different platforms to follow the streaming services, read the sacred text, and interact on its digital platforms, the LPCB members' use of the virtual environments is primarily passive. The digital presence of the Church is essentially exploited to find information regarding the Church's activities, without any significant online religious practice or interaction among members. In line with the expectation expressed by the senior pastor in his statement above, LPC and LPCB pastoral activity online never encourages or engages virtual religious participation. Institutional religious digital platforms are used to 1) formally state LPC's global religious, evangelical and missionary purpose; 2) represent the hierarchical structure of the Church, which is based on promoting the activities of the central church in Smyrna; 3) consolidate a narrative of identification without stimulating independent interaction among members.

However, the last part of the questionnaire, which asked LPCB members how they stay in touch with the rest of the community, revealed an interesting aspect that called out for a more in-depth study. Independent of the official online platforms of the Church, members share an unofficial and informal religious online communication that overturns the interaction patterns analyzed thus far.

6 LifePointers: A Hidden Virtual/Real Religious Community

Aside from the official LPC digital platforms, members created two closed Facebook groups administrated only by Church members and set to be invisible and inaccessible to all but those who have been invited to subscribe to them. In that way, only those who are already members of the

group can add new members. These access rules are clearly posted and displayed at the top of the groups' pages:

December 9, 2015

F.J.:

Dear all,

I would like to underline that this group is a safe place to communicate. Not only is the group secret (not visible to non-members), it also only contains members we all know and are of the LifePoint family. I have further made it so that I need to approve any new members that will be added.

The two groups are different in their composition: the larger one includes some 350 participants from all LPC campuses, whereas the smaller group comprises fewer than a hundred people connected to the Brussels campus.⁷

Any observation of the interaction on these group pages immediately reveals intense communication among members based on the sharing of photos and prayers related not only to the activities of LPC, but also to the daily religious experiences of the members. In both groups, religious interactivity and intimacy among members are much deeper than those observed on the official LPC online platforms. Moreover, the intimacy and interactivity within the smaller group are greater than within the larger group. The larger group's page is updated weekly, especially during the Sunday services, and communication often intensifies during special moments for the community.

For example, while I was conducting my research two dramatic events indirectly and directly struck Belgium. In November 2015, a curfew was announced in Brussels following the terrorist attack at the Bataclan concert hall in Paris. Then, in March 2016, Brussels itself was the victim of an attack. During these tragic events, the international community of LifePointers⁸ in the larger Facebook group supported the Brussels community by expressing online their feelings of strong solidarity, closeness and religious assistance.

During the days of the Brussels curfew, the Brussels campus remained closed for more than two weeks, but members kept in touch via the local Facebook group page by organizing private Sunday meetings to watch online streaming services from Smyrna (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). Simultaneously the rest of the LifePointers who subscribe to the group pages took part digitally in these private services, posting and sharing pictures.

⁷ In order to respect the privacy of the groups, I will not divulge the names of their Facebook pages.

⁸ The congregants generally refer to themselves as LifePointers.

November 21, 2015

F. J.: Tomorrow’s service is cancelled; if anyone wants to meet for fellow time, we could have a movie afternoon at my place. Strictly LifePointers.

November 21, 2015, h: 11:13

C.N.: Really?

November 21, 2015, h: 11:27

R.V.: Oooh!



Figure 1

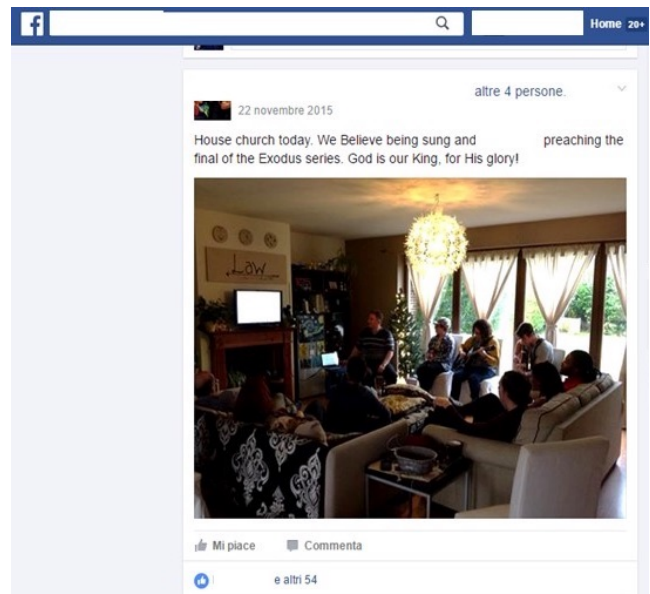


Figure 2

The night after the attack that directly involved Brussels, all LifePointers demonstrated their closeness to the Brussels groups by writing messages of solidarity on the larger group’s Facebook page. In the meantime the congregants in Brussels gathered themselves on this virtual platform, devoting it to the search for mutual religious assistance, as the comment below shows:

March 22, 2016 h: 23:57

F. J.: Dear all, Thank you for your prayers of support. I know this has meant a lot to all of us and has been that shining light throughout the day. The day has been a real reminder of the battle we have and why this must continue. There will be countless stories of sadness, loss, chaos and darkness.

One bright story I want to share with you all: By chance, one of our diplomats found a school class – some 20 teenagers (14–15 years old) lost in a park some blocks from the Embassy. We got them back and, out of nothing, the reception was filled with teenage laughter and smiles. As if by magic, 40 pounds of spaghetti Bolognese came out of nowhere and the kids got a proper meal. After a few challenges, a bomb risk (where we had to evacuate the kids to the garden) and other things, we were able to escort them to their bus, which was parked a few minutes away and was ready to drive them back to Denmark. And at that instant, the school bus was suddenly ‘upgraded’ to an unofficial diplomatic Greyhound service, giving a free lift to some stranded people [including] Danish government employees, one of them a lady who had her last day at the embassy after 3 years of service.

So the moral for me is: God has indeed been at work here, creating small miracles in this really complicated chaos.

Would you all continue to pray for us, The Church and the city?

In love, F.J.

Likes: 54

Comments:

March 23, 2016 h: 0:00

B. H.: Continued prayers.

March 23, 2016 h: 0:06

K. L.: Continued prayers today and always!!! And sending you all huge hugs!!! We love you all!!!

March 23, 2016 h: 0:09

J. M.: Always!

March 23, 2016 h: 0:32

E. M.: Be safe, F.J. Praying for you and my LifePoint Brussels family.

March 23, 2016 h: 0:55

B. W.: Praying.

March 23, 2016 h: 1:00

L. P. G.: Love hearing special God stories out of tragedy. Thx for sharing. You know my heart will be in constant prayer for all of you.

March 23, 2016 h: 1:09

C. H.: Praying for you and all our church family always

March 23, 2016 h: 1:15

B. S.: Continuing to pray. We love you all!

March 23, 2016 h: 1:17

M. W.: Praying always.

March 23, 2016 h: 1:29

K. G.: Thank you for the update! Praying!

March 23, 2016 h: 1:38

J. R. G.: Praying!

March 23, 2016 h: 2:32

C. J. C.: Wow! So awesome to see God at work in every situation. He holds it all.

March 23, 2016 h: 4:47

D. M.: Thank you so much for sharing F! I was just sharing with someone today that I will still give God Praise & Glorify Him no matter the circumstance because He deserves Praise first of all but also because He is always working whether seen or unseen... So grateful you saw Him work in this way today & that you & others were able to be involved with Him in His specific work! Love you brother & continuing to pray!

As already mentioned, on the smaller group page – used mostly by Brussels members – the interaction among subscribers is even more informal and familiar than that which occurs on the larger group page. Indeed, the intimate conversations on the local group page are fostered by the personal and direct contact that people have during the Sunday services. The page is updated several times a week, and the contents of the interaction are based on the personal and private experiences of members who explicitly require religious support from the group.

September 14, 2015 h: 22:50

R.: Hey guys, I know it's late, and maybe I won't have any answer, but God put in my heart the need to pray for you so tell me if you have a prayer request. 😊

Likes: 9

Comments:

September 15, 2015 h: 2:39

A. R.: would you pray for my mother? She's in the hospital. Thank you. Miss you!

September 15, 2015 h: 3:32

K.: will be traveling tomorrow to South Dakota.

September 15, 2015 h: 4:23

B: I'm traveling to Kansas tomorrow for work. Also, have had some sinus pain today, so please pray for healing. Thank you R. Please let me/us know how we can pray for you.

September 15, 2015 h: 7:04

R.: I will pray for you all. I woke up with a stomach pain this morning and I have to watch my niece today, so please pray that's not a virus and that the pain will go away... Thank you 😊

Likes: 3

September 15, 2015 h: 7:04

C: This is awesome R.! A. I'll be praying for your mom. K. and B. I'm also praying for your travels. Our co-op starts today, we are leading devotions. I'm teaching back to school class and elementary art class. Prayers treasured!

September 15, 2015 h: 7:27

R. B.: Hello. Great idea R. You can pray for me as Sunday I am preaching on Romans 4:13–25. Thanks, will pray for all those other requests too.

Likes: 1

September 15, 2015 h: 7:34

Y: Praying for your mom **A** and for you my friend **R**.

September 15, 2015 h: 8:42

A. K.: Would you pray for me R.? I feel I am going to be sick – I have a very strong headache and sore throat. Thank you!

September 15, 2015 h: 8:45

A. K.: A. I'm praying for your mother, R I am praying for you, K. and B. I am praying for your safe travels

September 15, 2015 h: 10:07

R.: Prayed for you all 😊 and thank you for the prayers, I already feel a bit better 😊

September 15, 2015 h: 23:39

C. C.: Since you asked, please pray for A's Mom; safe travels for K and for B; for P; for K and D; S and K missionaries in San Salvador; D T's studies; and for R and C; M and AC; and, L and A; and for R B! R I am praying for you, too! Thank You!

September 15, 2015 h: 23:50

G. K.: I'll be praying for all of you 😊 Please pray for my sister's wedding. She's supposed to get married in less than a month but the Belgian administration is complicating the procedures because she's Congolese and her fiancé is Belgian. Thank you. <3

The informal communication performed on these group pages helps to construct a shared narrative of religious and personal solidarity among members spread all over the world. For both groups, the delimitation of a private and exclusive space, dedicated to members' needs, is a remarkable example of the construction of an ideal 'atmosphere' to accommodate religious practices and values, an 'atmosphere' totally absent from the official and public communication of the Church.

7 Reflections and Discussion

The privacy offered by these two groups accommodates informal, unofficial, decentralized communication that greatly improves and integrates the official offline and online religious practices and narratives of the entire international community of LifePointers. On these Facebook group pages, members intensify their relationships, interacting even more frequently than would be possible for them to do in the offline spaces.

The larger group's page – covering wide geographic distances – allows members to share weekly religious and personal experiences that they would most likely never be able to share physically. The same happens for the smaller Brussels group, where members can improve their group cohesion, interacting not only during the Sunday services, but also in their daily lives. In contrast to the official online communication, unofficial LPC online communication helps to create 1) a supportive religious narrative among members; 2) a deeper interaction and emotional intimacy among members; and 3) a daily exchange of religious/personal experiences and practices.

Observing the interaction on these group pages through the lens of RSST, it becomes evident that members not only create their narrative of religious mutual support and solidarity, but also renegotiate the rules of interaction with technology. The presumed expectation that Facebook will be used to create an open network of people is converted by members into a closed and exclusive

space where members can privately share their religious and personal feelings. Choosing their moral economy – i.e., the people who can join the group and their patterns of interaction – members identify a virtual space set apart to reinforce their communal religious practices and group identity.

8 Conclusion

In the final analysis, the two different usages of the Internet made by LPC call into question the general definition of the Internet as a ‘sacramental space’, as argued by Campbell (2005). Following her formulation, it would be possible to lump together in this same definition the understanding of the Internet according to the senior pastor, the official online presence of LPC, and the deeper religious interaction that occurs in the secret Facebook groups. However, according to the very meaning of the term ‘sacramental’ – as understood in the Durkheimian tradition – the creation of the two secret Facebook groups can be intended exactly as the social construction of a space separated from the other (virtual) spaces of daily life. Indeed, as soon as the members cross the virtual ‘threshold’ of these groups, they perceive that they are entering a special ‘atmosphere’ that allows them to share the same religious grammar (Rosati 2015). Such an atmosphere, which is an integral aspect of Campbell’s definition of the Internet as a sacramental space, is clearly absent from LPC’s official online communication.

In conclusion, religious communities such as LPC show how the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’ lives can become integrated with each other in order to consolidate religious communities. As seen above, the interconnection of the offline and the online spheres can foster group solidarity and cohesion, overcoming some of the inevitable constraints imposed by offline communication. Finally, this research – highlighting the differentiated usages of the Internet made by LPC members – encourages further studies to reflect on the nuances of ‘being online’ for religious groups, pointing out that the same religious community can use and conceive of the Internet in different ways depending on whether the context is private or public, formal or informal.

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Biography

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