Anglicans of Second Life - some reflections on lived experience

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Contents

1. What is *Second Life*? Page 3
2. The Benefits of *Second Life* Page 4
3. The Dangers of *Second Life* Page 8
4. The History of the Anglicans of *Second Life* Group Page 12
5. Online Church Page 15
6. Anglicans of *Second Life* – Strengths
    - 6.1 Worship Page 16
    - 6.2 Community Page 17
    - 6.3 Mission Page 19
    - 6.4 Connection Page 20
7. Making a Difference
    - 7.1 Reconnecting with God Page 21
    - 7.2 Support through Grief Page 21
    - 7.3 The Courage to go on Living Page 22
    - 7.4 Fully Included Page 22
    - 7.5 Healing and Hope Page 23
    - 7.6 An Opportunity for Ministry Page 23
8. Anglicans of *Second Life* – Challenges
    - 8.1 Worship Page 24
    - 8.2 Community Page 26
    - 8.3 Mission Page 27
    - 8.4 Connection Page 29
9. Involvement with Anglicans of *Second Life* Page 31
10. Relating Online and Face to Face Ministry Page 32

Appendix 1 i-church Page 35

Appendix 2 OliveBranch Page 38

Appendix 3 Web 2.0 and the Church Page 40

Bibliography Page 41

This paper was written for the Director of Ordinands in Wakefield Diocese. It should be considered a draft and should not be quoted from or cited.

1. What is *Second Life*?

Second Life[1] began in 1991 as *Linden World*[2], the brainchild of Philip Rosendale who had always been interested in how we change the world around us[3]. It is a 3D world created by computer programming. Although originally built in such a way that it resembled a video arcade game, it was realised that providing residents of this virtual world with the tools to create their own landscapes, buildings, clothes, cars etc, was the way to move forward. The world of *Second Life* as it is now has been built by the people who inhabit it.

In June 2003 *Second Life* was made available to the public and had just 1000 members[4]. The current membership runs into millions and is growing daily. On checking the statistics in the afternoon of 23rd April 2009, 1,415,498 people had logged on in the previous 60 days and 66,259 were logged on at that time.

Every day millions of objects are added to the world, everything from 'palaces to pebbles'[5]. There is a thriving commercial aspect to the world, with $1.4 million spent each day on items and services offered by members to other members.[6] Within the world people meet and talk, attend concerts, run businesses, have sex, listen to lectures, worship, go shopping, develop communities, play games and bring their imaginations alive by turning the pictures in their heads 'into a kind of pixelated reality'[7]. There is even an in-world currency called Linden dollars (L$) which can be exchanged from American dollars.

Members of *Second Life* (*SL*) – residents - move around in the world in the form of *avatars*, representations of themselves. The word comes from Sanskrit Avatara which means "incarnation".[8] In *SL* the avatars are rather similar to mythological gods in their abilities, being able to fly or go from place to place in an instant (teleport) and to change their appearance at will, not necessarily keeping human form.[9]

The world of *SL* appears to be physically like the world we are familiar with. It is made up of regions each with land, water and air (in terms of space above the land, rather than a gas which is breathed in). There is gravity, weather and the passage of time marked by sun and moon. For the purposes of governance, *Second Life* is divided into areas which include several regions all governed by one set of rules, one of these being the teen grid for 13-17 year olds.[10] Some areas in *SL* are rated as PG, thus limiting what activities and appearance are permissible, and some are rated as Mature.

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[1] http://secondlife.com/
[2] Michael Rymaszewski, *Second Life, the Official Guide,* (Wiley 2008), pg 4
[3] Ibid, pg iii
[4] Ibid, pg iii
[5] Ibid, pg 6
[6] http://tinyurl.com/3a2v6n
[7] Rymaszewski, *Second,* pg iii
[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(computing)
[9] Rymaszewski, *Second,* pg 5
[10] Ibid, pp 5-6

2. The Benefits of *Second Life*

'*Second Life* is a 3D online digital world imagined, created and owned by its residents'.[11] In the words of the creator of *SL*: 'all we've created is a platform, an almost empty world; where we got lucky is in the fact that you came along and breathed life into it. If *Second Life* is a world at all, it's because you've created it.'[12] 'From your point of view, *SL* works as if you were a god.'[13]

As we hear in the beginning of Genesis, God created the world out of nothing. There is an echo of 'The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep' (Genesis 1:2) in the words of Philip Rosedale about *SL*. God saw in his imagination what could be and brought it into being with a word.

In his final act of creation, on the sixth day, God made human beings in his image, after his likeness. God is creative and humans are also, as is apparent when we look around the world in which we live. *SL* allows people to imagine how things might be and then to bring them into being, even if they would not be possible in real life (RL). Unlike God, people cannot do that with just a word, but with many words - the instructions of a programming language - it can be achieved. This release of personal creativity is not limited as much by physical ability as in RL, allowing people who are handicapped in some way to participate more fully and use their talents rather than burying them.

Musicians are able to give 'live' shows in *SL*. Some who do this are already established performers but others use *SL* as a way to begin their career in music. The music which is heard at these shows is actually played as a DJ would do, but the avatar of the musician moves to the music and will have an appropriate instrument to 'play' using an animation.[14] Artists too have the opportunity to produce work in *SL* which can be visited in galleries and museums. Art in *SL* is able to be interactive also, which is a bonus for the visitor.[15] Clothing designers can let their imaginations run wild, creating modern and period style clothes for avatars to wear.

Growing out of the creativity of residents are the many business ventures which exist in *SL*. Some people make their living entirely from business conducted in *SL*, and others have both RL and *SL* businesses which complement one another. RL business is more likely to make realistic amounts of money.[16] Anshe Chung is the wealthiest person in *SL* and is a millionaire in RL. In-world, the money is made by selling and renting property and from currency exchange. In the RL Anshe Chung is a consultant on virtual worlds. Anshe Chung Studios employs people to create items for virtual worlds and pays them real money as salaries.

[11] Ibid, pg 2
[12] Ibid, pg iii
[13] Ibid, pg 5
[14] Ibid, pg 288
[15] Ibid, pg 51
[16] Ibid, pg 276

Linking RL and *SL* like this is the best way to make money through *Second Life*.[17]

Business conducted using *SL* is much less greedy in terms of using the world's resources than RL business and helps with the stewardship of the earth, though it needs electricity to run the computers. IBM's Academy of Technology took advantage of this and chose to run their Virtual World Conference and Annual Meeting for over 200 people in *SL* in a specially designed area. It is estimated that there was a $320,000 return on investment for the conference and that the Annual Meeting cost only one fifth of what it would cost in RL. As well as saving money, the conference saved employee time. Participants could attend the conference and then return to work straight away with no delay for travel and no issues of jetlag. Delegates found that they enjoyed meeting to chat after sessions, much as they would do at a RL conference. Reflecting on the experience, those who attended really felt that they had been present at the events. As a result, IBM is now committed to using virtual worlds.[18]

It is possible to find in-world jobs which pay in Linden dollars. There is a Job Island in *SL* and also employment agencies. Some of the jobs on offer recently were sales staff for homes, DJs, dancers, escorts, entertainers to chat to visitors, photographers, sales staff to sell advertisements in an in-world magazine, cashiers in a coffee shop, artists, musicians and writers for live poetry readings. Some owners simply want people to be present at their venue and pay people for 'camping', which basically means sitting around. This helps that venue move up the rankings of the Popular Places search and in turn attracts more people.[19] It is possible to break into an area in *SL* which will help with RL opportunities. Someone wishing to be a journalist, for instance, might find it easier to get a job in *SL* at first and could continue to work at their RL job while gaining experience.

For a person who may be unemployed in RL, finding an in-world job can give a much needed boost to confidence and maintain dignity. Having a routine with a commitment can be very helpful in giving purpose to an unemployed person's life, and the L$ earned allow spending in *SL*, even if spending in RL is severely curtailed. In times of economic hardship, this means of maintaining self-esteem could be very important.

For many residents, the main draw of *SL* is the chance to socialise with people from all over the world. Those who would have no other way to meet up can get to know one another and become friends. There is a real emotional connection created, though for those who have not experienced it this seems to be a mystery. For those who are isolated by geography, commitments or health issues, this is a great bonus. We were created by a triune God, a God who is a community, and we need community to be healthy. There are common interest groups in-world which help create opportunities to link up with potential friends. These friendships can spill over into RL also. This happened for one person who, after Hurricane

[17] Ibid, pg 276
[18] http://secondlifegrid.net/casestudies/IBM
[19] Rymaszewski, *Second,* pg 262

Katrina, was given a temporary home with a friend he had met in *SL*. Others choose to meet up socially in RL but this is not always possible due to distances.

On entering *SL* residents choose a name and create an avatar. 'Your avatar choices say a lot about who you are; to the people you encounter in the *SL* world, your avatar is who you are. It's true too – your avatar choices reflect your personality and mentality'.[20] Theoretically a person can throw off all constraints and become whatever they want to be, limited only by imagination. Imagination is actually likely to be limited by cultural make-up. Also our personality is going to go with us, as are our political views and our worldview, whether religious or secular. The social skills and coping mechanisms in RL will still be part of the online person.[21]

There is certainly the opportunity to learn more about the self in *SL*. I was amazed to find out how I chose to furnish my office in *SL*. The style is nothing like my RL surroundings. Simply creating your avatar gives insight into how you see yourself, possibly revealing aspects of your personality you were not aware of. I have certainly found I relate closely to my avatar and was quite upset to find that for some reason I gained a black face and black hands. I was surprised at the relief I felt to return to my normal appearance. One person I met had tried out an able-bodied avatar, though disabled in RL, but reverted to one more like their RL self as it felt more genuine. I wondered if this would still be an issue for this person beyond this life, where we generally expect to be whole and perfect.

Whereas most residents keep their real life gender in *SL*, in a survey 14% were found to be males playing females and 3.5% were females playing males.[22] This may give an opportunity to explore different aspects of self which would be more difficult or controversial to explore in RL. One member of Anglicans of *Second Life* (AoSL) is currently dressed as a show-girl after a charity fundraiser but is actually male in real life. He had already noticed that others responded to him differently as a female before his latest change in appearance which leaves him feeling 'conspicuous'. The opportunity to interact with people from all over the world also highlights cultural differences and cultural assumptions that we may not ordinarily be aware of in ourselves.

In general people are more open and honest when sharing in *SL* than they would be in RL. The anonymity provided by the mask of an avatar releases people and leads to greater trust and a chance to be more our real selves[23], rather than the public image we have so carefully built up. Relationships can be more intense as a result but this provides us with a way of seeing ourselves more clearly. In the process of sharing our thoughts with others, we may express something that has remained hidden from ourselves previously and thus really hear ourselves.

[20] Ibid, pg 10
[21] Ibid, pg 226
[22] Ibid, pg 86
[23] Ibid, pp 230-231

SL offers wonderful opportunities for education and the sharing of knowledge. This is exploited by universities and schools around the world. The Open University, Harvard and Stanford are just three of the well known universities that have a presence in *SL*.[24] This is actively encouraged by Linden Labs who offer reduced prices on land in-world for those establishments which want to set up virtual campuses. On the campuses students can meet up, go to lectures and work on projects together. Educators within *SL* connect with others to learn how best to exploit this new medium for learning. There is so much more that can be offered in the *SL* environment than in RL, but this requires educators to unlearn old ways of doing things in order to exploit the new. Exciting possibilities such as actually moving around inside a human cell or walking around a giant model of a molecule are just a beginning.[25] The New Media Consortium has an international membership of educators dedicated to developing the use of virtual worlds for learning.[26] NMC has its own campus in-world which it uses to explore learning and collaboration in SL.[27]

Second Life is used for charitable purposes on a regular basis. The first known use in this way started in April 2004 when a retired marine installed donation boxes within his casinos to raise money for a support group for veterans. A little later, funds were raised for the Electronic Frontier Foundation which defends 'free speech, privacy, innovation, and consumer rights' in the networked world.[28] Fundraising for Relay for Life, an American cancer charity, is an annual event raising thousands of dollars.[29] There have also been collections for the Hurricane Katrina victims and recently those affected by the fierce bush fires in Australia. Auctions, parties, donations boxes and raffles in *SL* have allowed real money to reach real people in need in the real world.

Although many serious activities take place in *SL*, there are many opportunities for fun. It is possible for your avatar to learn to jet-ski or hang-glide, to race cars, go dancing, watch a film, visit casinos, go to the beach, have a picnic, test drive new cars and enjoy many cultural activities such as plays, poetry readings and exhibitions. The opportunities are vast in scope.

[24] http://secondlifegrid.net/slfe/education-use-virtual-world
[25] Rymaszewski, *Second,* pg 355
[26] http://www.nmc.org/about
[27] Rymaszewski, *Second,* pg 353
[28] http://www.eff.org/about
[29] http://tinyurl.com/6d2epm

3. The Dangers of *Second Life*

For many people, the mere mention of the Internet brings to mind thoughts of danger. However, when signing up to a website it is normal to agree to the terms and conditions of use. These are designed as a protection for those joining, and allow someone to be suspended or banned from accessing a site if a report of abuse of the site is received. *Second Life* is no exception[30] with the most extreme measure being the banning of the account which means an avatar effectively dies.[31] Social norms act as an additional way to control behaviour online in much the same way as in RL.

Although there are advantages to the hidden nature of the person behind the avatar, there are also dangers. It is possible to pretend to be someone else and so gain someone's trust. It is commonly given advice not to disclose personal contact details to someone met via the Internet, whether that be in *SL* or a chat-room, and not to arrange to meet up alone with that person in RL.[32] We are denied many social clues by not being able to see the faces, and often not hearing the voices, of those with whom we are conversing but the appearance of the avatar and the use of gestures and emoticons can make up for this lack.[33] The increasing use of voice rather than just text will make it more difficult, for instance, for a predatory male to pretend to be a female friend, offering greater protection from this particular kind of deception.[34] Voice also gives more clues about the personality of the one talking.

The biblical advice to be 'as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves' certainly applies to online interaction. Trusting relationships can and do happen on the Internet but we are well advised to exercise some caution and be alert for any indication that all is not well. Over time a person develops a pseudonymous identity, built up by how they behave online, and this tends to converge with the real self giving those who interact with them a much better idea of the real person behind the avatar.[35] Avatars provide the perfect opportunity to be a wolf in sheep's clothing, but, as Jesus said, we can recognise the type of person someone is by their fruit. Perhaps having an avatar which looks very different from the real person is no more sinister than choosing to power dress for an important business meeting in RL.

One member of AoSL met with an avatar looking like a priest. She found herself being told things that conflict with Christian belief. It has taken some time for her to recover from the experience as she has talked to other members of the Anglican community. Another person started to make his confession to an avatar dressed as a priest who came into a worship service offering to hear confessions. Other members of the group fortunately advised against this and the 'priest' quickly disappeared when

[30] http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php
[31] Rymaszewski, *Second,* pg 236
[32] http://www.wiredsafety.org/safety/chat_safety/chatrooms/index.html
[33] Rymaszewski, *Second,* pg 233
[34] Ibid, pg 232
[35] Ibid, pg 235

challenged about his identity. The application of a little wisdom and caution, and the testing of the message against scripture could have avoided these problems.

Deception is nothing new in human relationships. Jacob putting goat's skin on his arms, in order to seem to be Esau when the aged Isaac felt him, was engaging in something very similar to the person in *SL* who chooses an avatar with the intent to fool those who interact with him or her. It is the medium rather than the activity which varies. Like Isaac, members of *SL* are denied the information from some of their senses through which they would make judgements on the veracity of what is being presented to them, leaving them more vulnerable to deception.

Crimes on the Internet are really the same crimes we are used to in RL but use a different medium through which to take place. A report on cybercrime identified five main areas of crime involving the Internet: identity theft and fraud, financial fraud, offences against the person, sexual offences and computer misuse.[36] Only the latter is unique to a world equipped with the Internet. Crimes found in *SL* are much the same as those found elsewhere on the Internet as a few examples will show.

Identity theft has led to a woman being swindled out of money in *SL* but questions were asked about whether this is really a crime the police should deal with.[37] Meanwhile there is a special department of the Metropolitan Police, the E-Crime unit, which has been proactive in seeking evidence of crimes such as fraud and money-laundering which have been committed in *SL*. The unit seems to be in no doubt that there will be real crimes committed. Dutch police also have taken a possible crime committed in *SL* seriously and arrested a teenager in connection with the theft of virtual furniture. Linden Labs, the creators of *SL*, are already aware of the potential for the site to be abused and have anti-fraud and anti-money laundering tools available. They are ready to work with police forces to counter crime.[38]

It is common to hear of famous brand names finding that copies of their goods are available for sale, undercutting them in the market place. Marco Eckert runs a business in *SL* selling clothes and skins. He found himself the victim of 'content pirates' who copied his designs and offered them at 50% of his prices. His sales slumped by 75% in a week.[39] Another retailer in a similar situation filed two complaints under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act although it is not clear if the act is designed to cope with the problems happening in *SL*.[40] Where a crime such as this involves people in more than one country, it is difficult to see how it can be resolved. These issues will no doubt keep lawyers and police forces struggling for some time in the attempt to find an appropriate response.

[36] https://www.garlik.com/press/Garlik_UK_Cybercrime_Report.pdf
[37] http://www.knowprose.com/node/16631
[38] http://tinyurl.com/cpdhpb
[39] http://tinyurl.com/3a2v6n
[40] http://tinyurl.com/37nceu

Within *SL* itself there are groups of police with some like the International Police Association being exclusively for active or former police servants who want to act jointly to target or facilitate crime reduction on the Internet, especially in *SL*. It is very difficult to verify which groups may be made up of genuine RL police or former police, however some are definitely trying to help control crime or griefing (those who bully in *SL* are called griefers[41]) in sims (landholdings) owned by the residents of *SL*. One Group, the Universal Police Department raises money for the Cancer Society, helps and gives assistance to new residents, and ran a 9/11 memorial ceremony last September as well as doing normal police type duties and making sure residents are upholding the Linden Labs Community Terms of Service Agreements.

There has been at least one case of virtual rape in *SL* reported to police.[42] There is some debate as to whether the term rape can be used in the case of an incident in a virtual world, but there is no doubt about the trauma that such incidents cause, even if occurring in text only environments.[43] A person suffering in this way may find themselves losing self-esteem and having problems with sex in RL. The effect can be much worse if a person has already suffered rape in RL. Relating in a virtual community requires more emotional availability and an abuse such as rape has magnified psychological effects as a result.

Second Life provides an adult community where those who wish to can explore their sexuality and break through the constraints of taboos. Sex can be simulated online using animations. There may be a question about whether cybersex is actually real sex but it is well known that the brain is the greatest erogenous zone and in a virtual world it is the mind that provides what is missing through lack of physical contact. Some people have a partner in *SL* who is not their partner in RL. Those involved may think that no harm comes from having a different partner in *SL* but Jesus was very clear that looking at someone with lust is the equivalent to adultery. Partners who feel cheated on are in no doubt either.[44] As a result of online affairs, partners are seeking divorces in real life. The marriage counselling organisation, Relate, is finding more couples who struggle with the damaging effects online relationships have in RL.[45] Thoughts themselves are not sin but dwelling on them, as can happen by being in-world, has the potential to make the thought become sin.

It is not usual for avatars to be approached for sex in *SL*. Some choose to act as prostitutes and invest time and money in order to be good at this. Obviously they do not mind being approached for sex as they wish to make money from it.[46] However these advances can be unwelcome to others. Some women choose to have child avatars to avoid being asked for sex and also to improve the language that is used to them. Even this is not necessarily foolproof as paedophiles approach child avatars for sex.[47]

[41] http://tinyurl.com/cnvwcp
[42] http://tinyurl.com/2v58ht
[43] http://www.juliandibbell.com/texts/bungle.html
[44] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nC2dxa0E3KI
[45] http://tinyurl.com/6s9qex
[46] http://tinyurl.com/d8fs6x
[47] http://tinyurl.com/c6azdc

Bestiality has also taken place in *SL*, though there were moves by Linden Labs to prevent this.[48] There are also those who embrace a Gorean lifestyle[49] in *SL*, with master-slave relationships and avatars wearing consent collars in order to be controlled by others.

In order to deal with the issue of residents risking contact with adult content that they do not want to see, Linden Labs is going to create a separate continent where adult-related activities can take place if they are not confined to private land. *SL* is already only open to those aged 18 or over but there will be stricter age verification needed to enter the adult continent. Content will be rated as adults-only to give residents a clearer view of what they might meet in a given private area and more control over what they experience. It is hoped it will also enhance the reputation of *SL* with businesses and educators.[50]

People can choose whether or not to get involved in the various sexual activities in *SL*, although some may feel coerced by more forceful characters. Something about which there is no choice is bullying. This can happen to new residents particularly, but not exclusively, and can be very distressing. Griefers may also choose to disrupt events taking place in *SL* rather than targeting individuals. The *SL* website gives advice on dealing with griefers and some of the in-world police help with this also.

The phenomenon of cyber addiction is now well known, with individuals spending hours at a time online. Spending time in *SL* can be a way to escape real life with all its pressures and difficulties. However, this can cause the breakdown of relationships in RL. The life of the avatar can be valued more than the real life a person has and people can show all the classic signs of better known addictions such as to drugs or alcohol. Centres specialising in treatment of this problem are now springing up. [51] God created people with bodies as well as minds and spirits. Sitting for long hours at the computer relating to others in a purely disembodied way is not healthy for the body or the mind. We are designed to use all our senses with touch being particularly beneficial for mental health. Touching, apart from a keyboard, is something *SL* cannot give us. Ironically, though the Internet opens the whole world to us, it can also reduce the world to a small screen if it is not treated with care.

In the same way that viewers are advised to keep things in perspective when they have seen programmes about crime on television, it is sensible to keep these negative aspects of *SL* in proportion. While not ignoring the less attractive features of this virtual world, we can think about the good, pure and wholesome aspects of *SL*. As Regina Lynn says, 'The truth is, anywhere people gather, we bring all of our potential with us -- for love, for sex, for community and creation, and for violence and destruction, too.'[52]

[48] http://tinyurl.com/d5hoby
[49] http://www.goreanliving.com/lifestyle.php
[50] http://tinyurl.com/c9qwkw
[51] http://tinyurl.com/3xtvz5
[52] http://tinyurl.com/2v58ht

4. The History of the Anglicans of *Second Life* Group[53]

The group Anglicans of *Second Life* (AoSL) was founded in November 2006 by Rocky Vallejo[54], an American Episcopalian, and had the Charter: *A Christian community for those who call themselves: Anglicans, Episcopalians or members of the Church of England, Episcopal Church or any of the other bodies of believers who share the Anglican heritage.* This was the first Anglican presence in SL.

The group met informally when in-world and chatted or prayed together. In February 2007 Arkin Ariantho joined the group and offered to lead it, forming a ministry group. The group agreed to construct a large building designed like a traditional cathedral. Other *SL* churches up to that point had been modern buildings or like small parish churches of medieval design. Having a cathedral rooted the ministry in the RL Anglican tradition. It was guaranteed to speak of Christian community to believers and others from around the world. Being so unusual the building was more likely to be noticed and so create interest in what was going on there. In the post-modern age people are interested once more in tradition but surrounded by technology. An ancient cathedral in an environment dependant on technology combines these factors.

Monty Merlin, with help from Elspeth and Barry Lubezki, created the Anglican Cathedral in *Second Life* between March and May 2007, partially modelling it on Durham Cathedral in England.

The community grew quickly and on 1st May 2007 two meetings were held to decide how to proceed. Funding had been found to purchase an island which would allow the cathedral to be moved to an area of *SL* dedicated to the Anglican ministry. Plans were made to publicise the ministry and to begin services as soon as possible. It was hoped that there would be a theological panel to look at issues surrounding online ministry and also a prayer group to support the ministry. On 8th June 2007 the cathedral moved to Epiphany Island. Since that time the island has been developed to include a grotto, labyrinth, meditation garden, conference centre with Bible study room and café, parish house with meeting space and offices, chapel, library and wine cellar under the cathedral, a dock area, several outside meeting areas and a secure skybox for Leadership Team meetings and private counselling sessions.

Arkin Ariantho shared his vision for the cathedral on 16th June 2007, a vision which remains to the present day:

- My vision is to see God glorified in *Second Life*.
- My vision is to see Christians from different countries and theological persuasions come together to serve and worship the Lord.

[53] This section has been created using the following sources:
http://www.p2ptrust.org/secondlife/SLfreshexpression2008-03-09.pdf
http://slangcath.wordpress.com

[54] *Second Life* names are used unless otherwise stated

- My vision is to see the Anglican Church engage in relevant, meaningful and contemporary ways with the society around it.
- My vision is to offer those involved in *Second Life* an experience of a God who deeply loves them and seeks a relationship with them.
- My vision is to be a community who are known for their love and care, and their preparedness to serve others.

The ministry team had its first meeting on 4th July 2007 and gave careful consideration to the kind of services which would be offered in the cathedral. The team wished the group in *SL* to remain in good standing with the Anglican establishment and so decided to use Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and Compline as the services of choice. The issue of sacraments in an online environment had the potential to cause difficulties and so it was decided not to celebrate any sacraments until discussions could take place.

The first service was held in the cathedral on 15th July 2007 and by September there were three Sunday services catering for all time zones. In September also, Arkin Ariantho (RL Mark Brown) and MikeCamel Albert (RL Mike Bursell) met with Bishop Christopher Hill of Guildford and his communications officer at Lambeth Palace. As a result of this, the support of the Ecclesiastical Law Society was offered to the ministry.

On 21st October 2007 a Bible Study began which has continued to meet weekly ever since. Two more services were added in November, one midweek and a 4th Sunday one. Also in November, Mark Brown was ordained deacon in Wellington, New Zealand, by Bishop Tom Brown who has an interest in new forms of church and undertook a study tour on the topic of Fresh Expressions some years ago. He agreed to license Mark to the ministry in *Second Life* as one aspect of his ordained ministry. In November 2008 Mark was ordained priest. This licensing effectively placed the ministry of AoSL under the authority of a RL diocese. Mark's announcement in April 2009 that he will step down as priest-in-charge on 14th June leaves some questions about how future relationships with RL dioceses will operate.

The membership of the Anglican group continued to grow rapidly and was almost at 300 by December 2007. At that point an eight member Leadership Team was formed comprising the group's founder, leaders of services and the Bible study and others who were involved in the ministry. Decisions about future direction were made in consultation with this team. There have been some changes in personnel but the Leadership Team continues to guide the ministry of AoSL and has recently conducted a detailed survey of that ministry, using an online questionnaire and discussions, which is now being analyzed to inform developments in the future. Membership of the AoSL group is now nearing 600.

The current provision on Epiphany Island comprises 7 services, some lay led, some led by ordained members including a Methodist minister. In some services there is a sermon but not in others. There is usually an opportunity for those attending to offer personal prayers during services. After services there is a chance to chat to others. The Bible study

continues each week and there is also a weekly discussion group (started in April 2008) on being a Christian in *SL*. There is a team of four people who will pray with anyone who wishes to have time to pray individually. Service leaders will also meet with people to talk through problems after services or individual meetings can be set up later.

In May 2008 a table top conference was held in Guildford, hosted by Bishop Christopher Hill.[55] There was a wide ranging discussion about all aspects of being church in *Second Life* and the implications for the Church in general. A paper was presented by Rupert Bursell regarding a constitution for AoSL and a context for the ministry was provided by Mark Brown's paper 'Christian Mission to a Virtual World'.[56] As a result of this conference four groups were formed to look at the constitution, legal matters, theology and resources. A leaflet was created for distribution at the Lambeth Conference and a presentation given there in one of the fringe sessions. Attendance was poor but those who did attend showed great interest in the potential of this ministry. In November 2008 a follow up meeting was held in Guildford to monitor progress. A final meeting of this group is planned for July this year by which time it is hoped to have a constitution ready and to be able to register as a charity in the UK.

[55] See Appendix 3
[56] http://tinyurl.com/ajfjzj

5. Online Church

Christian ministry online can trace its history from the 1970s when it used pre-Internet bulletin board systems. A very early online service was conducted in 1986 after the Challenger shuttle disaster.[57] Since that time many online churches have sprung up, some using forums and chat rooms such as St Pixel's and i-church, some three dimensional like the Church of Fools which had a lifespan of four months in 2004.[58]

In *SL* at the moment there are about 450 groups which have the word church in their title but many do not have qualified priests or ministers. In fact some are anti-church. Many of the main RL churches are present in *SL*. Others are run by people who feel alienated from "normal" RL churches such as people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Some of the churches have services which are run in real time, some where you can listen to the service at any time. There are Bible studies, prayer meetings and Christian counselling on offer. In other places there are church buildings which may be used for prayer, but no organised services. In *SL* anyone can build a church if they can find a place to put it.

With the advent of Fresh Expressions of church, there have been questions asked about what exactly church is. This is something the Sheffield Centre[59] has been working on for over 10 years. In Matthew's gospel (18:20) Jesus suggests that to be church we have to come together in his name. Robert Warren describes the traditional notion of church as building + priest + Sunday service.[60] He suggests that a definition which more closely accords with the current situation is that church is community + faith + action, or 'an engaging faith community'.[61] Rowan Williams has suggested church is 'what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other'.[62]

This Christ centred[63] view that church is what happens when people gather round Jesus is explored on the Share the Guide website.[64] Looking at the description of the church in the Nicene Creed as One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, these definitions are redefined as dimensions:

Holy = UP which is concerned with Worship
One = IN which looks at Community
Apostolic = OUT which is Mission
Catholic = OF which describes Connection to whole body of Christ.

Using this picture of church, it is possible to examine the ministry of Anglicans of *Second Life*.

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[57] Tim Hutchings, Unpublished essay written for the i-church Vision Weekend, 26-28th January 2007
[58] www.churchoffools.com
[59] http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk/
[60] Robert Warren, *The Healthy Churches' Handbook,* (Church House Publishing, 2004), pg 84
[61] Ibid, pg 85
[62] Graham Cray et al, *Mission-shaped Church,* (Church House Publishing, 2004), pg vii
[63] Ian Bunting (Ed), *Celebrating the Anglican Way,* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), pg 147
[64] http://tinyurl.com/c64zt2

6. Anglicans of *Second Life* – Strengths

6.1 Worship

Worship is a natural part of the life of the Church. The foundation of the Church is being with Jesus. Ephesians 5:25-32 describes the intimate relationship the Church has as the bride of Christ. Intimate relationships are nurtured by spending time together.

Worship online is the same and yet different from that in RL. In some respects it may not be as effective as RL worship but it draws people into community nevertheless. The simplicity of the services makes for beautiful worship with which many connect, including those who are not Anglican. As it is necessary for the leader to wait for responses to be typed by those participating, there is a slowing of the pace of worship. This allows the power of the words to re-emerge. The transcendence of the Word of God can once more be recognised as it is presented in this new way. Online worship can bring moments of real connection with God as well as a sense of being part of the worldwide Church. As a result, RL religious lives can be deepened or reawakened.

The opportunity to post prayer requests in the cathedral is valued by many, as is the option of lighting a virtual votive candle. There is no doubt that prayer online is felt to be real. Within RL churches, prayer may be offered for needs in distant lands. When praying for something in *SL*, there is the possibility of the presence of others from that country which makes it so much more real. We receive news of people who have been healed after receiving prayer support from the cathedral congregation. Distance was no barrier to Jesus when he healed the centurion's servant and is no barrier for us either as we follow in his footsteps.

We live in an age that hungers for spirituality and seems fascinated by the monastic life. People are looking to find ways of living their faith and sharing in prayer with others. Many of the new forms of church have elements of monasticism in them.[65] The physical design of the *SL* Anglican cathedral links with the life of monks in former times. Many notice a peace in the surroundings, finding that sacred space can be created in a virtual environment.[66] The international nature of the congregation and leadership, and the availability of *SL* at all times, lends itself to offering several offices a day. This is not yet the case in the Anglican cathedral in *SL* but it was in i-church for quite some time, with five offices being offered each day for a period. Already there are four midweek services offered at the cathedral, which is more than most parish churches could manage, though RL cathedrals do so.

Attending services is much easier online than in RL. There is no need to travel, no babysitting arrangements to make, not even the need to get dressed for a morning service. No one minds if people drop in (sometimes

[65] http://prayerfoundation.org/brief_history_new_monasticism.htm
[66] Paul Walker, *Church 2.0: an exploration of the impact of emerging internet technologies on mission and ecclesiology,* (MA dissertation 2009), pg 21

literally) in the middle of a service, or have to leave early. Everyone is keen to help anyone new to find their way through the service, which is on one notecard rather than on many pieces of paper. All are welcome and there is an awareness of different traditions. For example, people are invited to stand if they wish for the Gospel but there is no expectation of rigid conformity to a norm. It is fine to arrive for worship in the shape of a skunk or a hippo or dressed in a ball gown or a disco outfit.

Some would see the lack of the celebration of the sacraments as a weakness of the cathedral but the sacrament of communion can be divisive, highlighting who is 'in' and who is 'out' of a community. As we concentrate on services of the word, our worship is able to include all. During the second Guildford conference on the Anglicans of *Second Life*, Bishop Christopher celebrated a RL Eucharist and those online were included but simply knelt or prayed during the distribution of the bread and wine. It was a blessed time for all and may point the way forward.

6.2 Community

God has always worked through communities from Adam and Eve, the people of Israel, the disciples of Jesus and on to the house churches of the early Church. He still works through community but the nature of community is changing. 'Community and a sense of community are often disconnected from locality and geography.'[67] Instead community is changing structure and forming around networks.[68] The cathedral in *Second Life* is part of the greatest network of the world, the Internet, and is where many people are looking for community and possibly a way to escape from RL for a time.

The mobility of society tends to reduce the willingness of people to make long-term commitments. The social norm is now one of disconnectedness where a sense of belonging is achieved remotely rather than face to face using text messaging or social networks such as Facebook.[69] These new models of community are not something that inherited church is equipped to understand or respond to but churches on the Internet, including the Anglican cathedral, are well placed to respond.[70]

Unlike the asynchronous communication of forums or social networks, *SL* gives a sense of person's presence relocated in space and time like our bodies are. Conversations work like face to face conversations even if conducted in text only. There are many times of fellowship after services or during chance encounters on Epiphany Island. Comments are often made about the great welcome received. People can find real community and real friendships online. Unlike in a RL church, the people associated with the cathedral may meet many times a week rather than 'going to church' as one event in a week. This is much closer to the New Testament model of church being a network of people to which an individual

[67] Graham Cray et all, *Mission-shaped*, pg 5
[68] Ibid, pg 7
[69] http://www.facebook.com
[70] Paul Walker, *Church 2.0*, pg 44

belonged and with whom they interacted regularly.[71] Church and life become one rather than being artificially separated as in the inherited model. This increases the level of support which can be offered.

With so many meetings happening between people, informal pastoral encounters are more likely, with lay people playing a prominent role. There is a chance to laugh with those who laugh and mourn with those who mourn as the curious mixture of intimacy and anonymity that is part of communication online offers opportunities to quickly learn what may be troubling a person. It soon becomes apparent that 'we are not dealing with pixels but with hearts', as Mark Brown said at the first Guildford conference. We have a chance to help people who might not turn elsewhere for help or who may not be able to find the help they need at that time of day. It is possible to bring a team together fairly quickly to support someone by prayer and listening, something that would be virtually impossible with chance encounters in RL. We gain joint wisdom this way and if one person has to leave, someone else is there to stay with the person in need. The international nature of the community is a real strength in this. On several occasions I have left a conversation as it was late and handed over to someone from America for whom it was earlier in the day.

The chance to meet people from all over the world is something that draws people to *SL*. God affirmed diversity at Pentecost when the disciples were given the ability to speak to people from many nations. Although most conversations are conducted around the cathedral in English, I have chatted to people in French and German also. Not only are people gathering from different nations but also from different traditions in the Church. There are opportunities to discuss with people with whom we may disagree and to begin to see an answer to Jesus' prayer that we may be one.

St Paul noted that there is 'neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female'. The community of AoSL embraces all on an equal footing, including some males who are female avatars. People with disabilities; those with limited opportunities to leave their home due to family commitments; and those who live a long way from a church, find equality of access to church online and are accepted on equal terms, with no one necessarily knowing their circumstances. It is up to the individual to choose to reveal personal details. This aspect of 'netiquette' (the etiquette of the Internet) is appreciated by many and is respected at the cathedral.

When moving house, the sense of community is one factor in choosing a new church.[72] People who have found community at the cathedral can take it with them when they move. This can offer stability in a time of change as well as prayer support during the move itself.

There is an awareness among the leaders of the ministry that issues of power can be present in church in *SL*. Tall avatars wearing black convey

[71] Eddie Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, (SPCK 2006), pg 100
[72] Stuart Murray, *Hope from the Margins*, (Grove Books Ltd 2000), pg 15

authority or domination. The avatars of several of the leaders have been changed to look more like the person behind them and so be more authentically like themselves. Ordained leaders are listed on the cathedral notice board by their RL names. All members of the Leadership Team give their RL names on the AoSL blog.

6.3 Mission

The Internet is accessed by 1.4 billion people worldwide.[73] Being present in *Second Life* gives the AoSL access to a significant and growing subset of this number. With no issues of travel or accessibility (apart from the need for a good computer and broadband connection), it is easier than in RL to be salt and light in this environment. The Internet provides 'an ideal medium for spiritual searchers to engage with the Christian faith'.[74]

Currently the cathedral uses an attractional model of church just like inherited church, although it has taken it to a new place, the Internet, where many Christians and non-Christians gather. The high profile afforded by the beautiful and unusual building and the exposure of the ministry in the media, draws many to us. Those attending services may be un-churched, de-churched due to difficulties in RL church or may be looking for more than their own church can provide. The cathedral is a safe place to encounter faith again or for the first time, without commitment. There is the opportunity to hear the Good News preached at most of our services and to hear the word of God at all services. Exploration can continue afterwards in conversation with members of AoSL or by arranging to meet one of the leaders individually. The sermons are usually posted on the AoSL blog and the statistics of the blog suggest that they are often read there. They may be accessed by those who have already heard them or by those who find out about the ministry initially from the blog.

The medium of *SL* is well suited to Bible study, either in text only or using voice. In a recent survey of our ministry a significant number indicated that they appreciate this opportunity to learn more about their faith. The weekly discussion group looking at being Christian in *SL* attracts many newcomers who can explore life in *SL* from a Christian worldview. This is advertised in the *SL* events calendar. In conversations there are opportunities to answer questions about the faith as they arise. The fluid nature of meeting in *SL* means that someone might be offered a chance to encounter Christ in this way, but is free to move on and take another path, much as the rich young ruler did after his conversation with Jesus. We are sowing seeds but have no idea if or when they will germinate.

There are many activities in *SL* which have the potential to damage the people who get involved, although they may not realise that at first. Those coming to the cathedral are responded to in love and can find healing. Although there is still work to do on having a constant presence, Epiphany Island is a Christian sim where there is often someone present

[73] http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
[74] Paul Walker, *Church 2.0*, pg 14

to talk to visitors, something which has been commented on positively by those who visit. God is at work bringing about meetings between people of different countries and cultures and through them bringing life and healing out of despair.

Individual members of AoSL are taking the opportunity to be present in many venues in *SL* where people go for fun activities such as dancing, simply for the purpose of meeting people and talking to them. There are many lonely people who really appreciate this.

6.4 Connection

The very name 'Anglican' connects the ministry at the cathedral with the wider church. This is built upon through the interest and support of Bishop Christopher Hill of Guildford and Bishop Tom Brown of Wellington New Zealand. This connection builds trust as it is the *SL* equivalent of something that many already know about. We are also connected to the Methodist church through the ministry of the Rev'd Gareth Edwards who is a member of the Leadership Team and leads services.

Although taking place in a very modern environment, the worship of the cathedral links with the traditions of the Church. The liturgy in the cathedral is recognisably Anglican but adapted for the medium. The use of the Lord's Prayer finds common ground with Christians of different traditions. Some worship leaders robe for services and others wear dark formal clothes, which is another link with tradition.

It is hoped that further links can be made with dioceses around the world. It should be possible to do this and at the same time maintain a ministry which does not need as much institutional support as a traditional church.[75] The combination of recognisable connections with flexibility of operation is something AoSL is well equipped to model.

The ease of communication between groups means that is it possible for groups of Christians to meet and work together, building on strengths and compensating for weaknesses. The medium allows ease of sharing knowledge, as universities have found, and training for evangelism would be easy to arrange in-world though we have not done so yet.

[75] Stuart Murray, *Hope,* pg 18

7. Making a Difference

7.1 Reconnecting with God

Skye[76] was adopted as a baby and suffered from feelings of rejection through her life. She became a Christian at the age of 11 but being raped at 15 damaged her relationship with God. She got involved in drink, drugs and sex and failed at school. Eventually she took an overdose but was found in time by her boyfriend. Skye became pregnant young and married when the baby was 6 months old. The couple had two other children but the marriage began to go wrong and Skye looked for comfort in online chat rooms, sometimes meeting the men she met there and sleeping with them. Eventually she joined *SL* thinking it could not be worse than her real life. She typed the word 'God' into the search facility and found one of the many churches. She met up with some Christians and this awakened the feeling that God was missing from her life. As a result of being prayed with in *SL*, Skye returned to her faith in God after a break of 10 years from church. Skye is now settled in a RL church where she is doing youth work and growing rapidly in her faith. One of those who prayed for her in *SL* found her a youth work course to do. As the result of the help and encouragement she has received in *SL,* she has also begun to go to a counsellor to sort out some of the issues from the past. She recognises that she would not be where she is now if it was not for her experiences in *SL*. Skye attends a Bible study in *SL* and some of the services at the cathedral. She has ongoing prayer support from her in-world friends and is beginning to reach out to others online to offer prayer and listening with the approval of her RL pastor.

7.2 Support through Grief

Cheryl visited the Anglican cathedral when she was looking for a church which would hold a memorial service for her RL boyfriend who had been killed in a car accident. She wanted to provide an opportunity for his *SL* friends to say goodbye. The memorial service was conducted by Gareth, the Methodist minister on the Leadership Team, and Cheryl found it to be a beautiful service. Cheryl's boyfriend was a Christian but she had abandoned the Roman Catholicism of her youth. After her boyfriend's death, Cheryl found comfort in going to church. Although the Roman Catholic Church did not seem to be quite right for her, Cheryl realised that there were other churches around which might be helpful to her. Cheryl has appreciated the welcome and peace of the cathedral. The opportunity afforded by people at the Anglican cathedral to talk about her boyfriend had helped her to work through her grief. She has felt helped and supported practically, spiritually and emotionally as she has begun to explore the Christian faith. Cheryl finds the services to be interesting and inspiring, and convenient when it is not possible to attend church in RL. She is beginning to get more involved in support of the ministry of AoSL, looking to help with fund raising events. She has been linked up with another member half way around the world from her and they are working on this together.

[76] SL names have been changed

7.3 The Courage to go on Living

Max joined *SL* a year ago. He was fascinated by it immediately, by the diversity and by the people who meet up and forge friendships there. At first Max enjoyed *SL* like an online game but he began to discover it had far more value than that. Though a Christian, Max did not attend church in RL. After a few weeks of exploration, a search for the word 'Christianity' brought Max to the Anglican cathedral. He was taken aback by the beauty and detail of the cathedral building and the peaceful atmosphere. He discovered that it was a very welcoming place, and felt very real. He wanted to know what a service would be like and so attended on the next Sunday. He found himself to be comfortable in the service and moved by what was for him a genuine expression of worshipping God. He found the fellowship after the service to be good and realised that he was among friends in a nice community. A few weeks ago Max's wife of 12 years walked out on him without warning and he felt absolutely desperate. He became suicidal and researched ways to take his life. Max sent a message to Mark, priest-in-charge asking if it would be wrong in God's eyes to kill himself. Mark, who was ill at the time, asked me to meet with Max and we had a long private conversation where I listened to his story and we discussed how the Christian faith might apply to his situation. Since then he has attended services and found strength through prayer and the friendship of members of the Anglican community which has thrown him a lifeline at a critical point in life. He would not have thought to look for help in a RL church at that time of great need.

7.4 Fully Included

Barbara has found that having church available online has enabled her to once more be a member of a congregation and to benefit from the ministry of ordained and licensed priests, something denied to her in RL as she is housebound. The interaction of an Internet church is much better than the passive listening to radio services or recorded sermons. There is the opportunity to join in with responses in services, which are recognisably Anglican and led by people of sound doctrine. The matter of equality is a powerful one, as Barbara is able to turn up to services just like anyone else, with no one knowing if she is in bed or dressed, something impossible to do in RL. She is able to play a full part in the service and has used voice to read in services at the cathedral. There is no need to explain her circumstances unless she wants to. Although a member of some online Christian discussion groups, Barbara had not been able to find the opportunity for theological discussion or Bible study of an appropriate depth. Barbara enjoys being part of Bible studies and discussions where she can listen to those whose opinion and erudition she admires and where her contribution is valued. She appreciates that the leaders are part of the Anglican Communion.

7.5 Healing and Hope

Misty first looked on *SL* as a game and as a way to earn some money. It was connecting with the Christian community that helped her to see it as more than that. In RL she suffered great trauma some years ago which *SL* is helping her to heal from, as a result of making new friends around the Anglican cathedral and elsewhere. She is awed by the friendships she has made and recognises that they have helped her to become a better person more able and willing to trust again and start life anew. The fellowship, support, kindness and grace found in *SL* has transferred to RL. Even through the upheaval of moving to care for an elderly relative Misty has found more balance, purpose, strength and meaning in her life as well as the ability to cope with her current situation. She feels hopeful for the future and has a fresh outlook on life. Misty has taken the opportunity to have some counselling in-world through the cathedral and is improving daily. She felt unable to resolve her issues through counselling in RL for financial and time reasons although she knew the need, but has been able to do so in *SL* and has seen changes in RL as a result. Misty has attended services in the cathedral and is a member of a Bible study group. She has taken a job in *SL* which has boosted her confidence in RL also. She is now applying for RL jobs with good motivation and is supported in prayer by *SL* friends as she does so.

7.6 An Opportunity for Ministry

Rose grew up as a Christian in the Baptist church but put her faith on the back burner when she married. Over time God got her attention again, helping her to have confidence to trust him when she needed to stop working as a result of stress. His timing was perfect, allowing her to care for her dying mother-in-law. This gave her an insight into the love God has for each of us as she watched through her mother-in-law's final moments. Immediately after her mother-in-law's death Rose discovered she had breast cancer and began a gruelling time of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatment. Through this she was sustained by prayer from those who knew her in RL and also from *SL* friends all over the world. In the process she experienced the healing of a long-term knee problem and learnt that healing is for all times. The treatment for cancer has had minimal side effects which has amazed the doctors. Rose knows that God wants her to pray for others and in RL now prays for family and friends and for two patients whom her doctor suggested. Within *SL*, Rose takes every opportunity to spread the word of God's mercy and love to her and how he can make a difference in their lives. She is a member of a Bible study group in *SL* and an inspiration to many. *SL* allows her to reach many more people with her testimony. She asks for prayer requests and appreciates that the time differences mean she may well be praying for someone when others are not because they are asleep.

8. Anglicans of Second Life - Challenges

8.1 Worship

For Anglicans, worship is the primary focus of their corporate life. Worship online, though effective, can be impoverished also. Currently it is not possible to join with a congregation online and sing along with them, making a joyful noise to the Lord together. There is a lag between one person and another hearing what is said so singing together would produce a cacophony. Issues with feedback limit the use of voice for responses in services, with text being much preferred. It is possible to enhance the experience with the use of streamed music, video presentations, changes of lighting, even moving to different areas of the island for parts of a service (all of which have been done at the cathedral), although the latter could be stressful for those who are not very good at moving their avatars. Using too much of the multi-media capability of SL could result in a disco and not worship. There is certainly plenty of scope to experiment with the visual aspects of the medium and with more informal worship. God uses creative experimentation in the process of evolution, which also includes the possibility of failure.[77] It is probably time to take the risk of including more unusual ways to offer the typical content of a worship service rather than always trying to clone RL.

Currently worship in the cathedral is restricted to non-Eucharistic services but the issue of communion will need to be addressed at some point. Many Fresh Expressions of church are led by lay people and so are not in a position to offer a Eucharist unless someone visits them for the purpose. For the Salvation Army, not celebrating Communion does not seem to have hampered them so some may think this is not an issue at all. The Share the Guide website points out that this lack of ordained leadership in new forms of church may result in Communion being celebrated on occasions in a theologically unconventional way. The same comment could apply to the cathedral in *SL*, but this would not necessarily be caused by the lack of ordained leaders but by the medium in which we operate. Is it actually possible to share Communion when not physically present with one another? It is necessary to consider how the Holy Spirit sanctifies the bread and wine. If it is through the manual action of the priest s/he will have to be present with the elements. If it is through the prayer of the priest, the prayer must surely work anywhere in the world as God is not limited by time and space. In this case individuals could partake of sanctified bread and wine wherever they are in the world. Some might say that the bread and wine need to be one before broken and distributed. However, in many Anglican churches, individual wafers are used which were never one. In the Church of Scotland, the wine is in individual glasses. Is there sufficient oneness in the consumption of the elements at the same time? Alternatively, do we avoid the physical RL aspect of Communion and simply have the necessary animations in *SL* to allow a priest avatar to distribute the elements and the communicant avatars to consume them? Is participating in Communion this way a valid

[77] http://www.sharetheguide.com

remembrance of the Last Supper? These questions are being looked into by the theology group which formed after the Guildford conference.[78]

Looking at other sacraments, what does a wedding performed online mean? Several people have asked to be married in the cathedral but have not been given permission. Online weddings are conducted elsewhere in *SL*. Would it be possible to baptize someone in *SL*? There is virtual water. Is it enough that the virtual water is poured on the avatar? What about absolution? Is it necessary to see the priest face to face or is it enough to hear/read the words and see the sign of the cross performed by an avatar? How does this relate to the confessionals where the penitent and priest did not see one another, and the priest did not even know who was on the other side of the grille? Perhaps the answers will depend to a certain extent on whether we take a disembodied approach to the Internet, similar to Gnostic dualism, or the Hebraic worldview 'that sees wholly integrated person with both a human and a spiritual component'.[79]

There is the challenge in any online worship of creating sacred space, assuming it is agreed that this is actually possible. There are ways to do this by using web architecture to create virtual doors so that the person online moves to another place in some way. In i-church[80] the chat-room had more than one room, so that each could be used for different purposes. Those attending worship went from the 'café' to the 'chapel' for worship and then back to the 'café' to chat afterwards. It was all done by the click of a mouse button but was a way of defining what was for sacred purposes. There was also one room called 'Sanctuary' where the convention was that mostly only one person would be there at once, and no chatting of any kind would go on if two or more were there. In OliveBranch[81] the chat-room is used only for worship, though some chatting may occur afterwards, so it is easy to see this as sacred space. In *SL* we have the cathedral building which marks sacred space in an almost physical way. There is the same issue of chatting as in i-church, with some people happy to greet their friends as they enter the building and others preferring to have that space as a quiet one for worship only.

Susan Hope stated: 'Those who set out on the journey of mission cannot do so without prayer because the journey cannot be undertaken without the Holy Spirit, and the way to access the Spirit and the Spirit's power is through prayer'.[82] A lot of work goes into providing opportunities for worship and prayer for the members of AoSL but little has been done yet to build times of prayer for the Leadership Team together. Also, each member of the team should be praying alone but little pastoral follow up has taken place to ensure that all is well in the spiritual life of the leaders or to offer help and support if one of the leaders is struggling. That is not to say that no prayer takes place but there is always the risk that the busyness of running the AoSL ministry will take precedence over the

[78] See Appendix 3
[79] Paul Walker, *Church 2.0*, pg 23
[80] See Appendix 1
[81] See Appendix 2
[82] Susan Hope, *Mission-shaped Spirituality,* (Church House Publishing, 2006), pg 61

spiritual underpinning needed for effectiveness. Leaders working in their own strength is a recipe for burnout.

8.2 Community

The early church grew rapidly partly due to the real sense of Christian community that was present.[83] RL churches nowadays often fail to provide a sense of community, replacing it with endless meetings and services.[84] It is important that community be at the heart of church life and that Christ be at the centre of community.[85] How can the body of Christ be realised in a disconnected world? The Internet fosters relationships that are essentially transient nature, where it is easy to join a group or forum and then forget about it, where low commitment is the norm. Looking to a future church on the Internet, Paul Walker says, 'Church 2.0 will need to be counter-cultural in emphasising the value and importance of giving space for building meaningful community'.[86]

Shane Hipps[87] would argue that it is not possible to have real community online though he acknowledges that meaningful connections and interactions happen.[88] Whether community online is real or not, efforts have been made to create it. In i-church[89] the plan to have a Benedictine flavour had the potential to create the stability needed to allow members to give of their own lives and reveal themselves to others. The use of small Pastoral Groups within a much bigger group also helped to create the necessary intimacy. Even the larger membership was limited by the need to join the community in order to be part of it. OliveBranch[90] has taken a similar approach, with a requirement to join before interacting. However, the group will not be allowed to grow too large. If increasing numbers become an issue the structure of OliveBranch will be freely shared with other groups to allow them to start their own small communities.

In *SL* there is a need to join but there is then no limit on where an avatar can go so theoretically all the millions of members have access to Epiphany Island. Attending services grants the relative anonymity that is also true for those choosing to worship in a RL cathedral. Although AoSL has nearly 600 members, visitors to the cathedral are not limited to these people. It will be necessary to provide more opportunities for core groups who meet regularly to grow up as a basis for a strong community. This in turn would develop an ethos and allow the creation of safe space in a place of anonymous freedom. Some sense of belonging is growing already among those who regularly attend services, study or discussion. We are beginning to look at other possibilities such as a support group for those who are unemployed, or special interest groups.

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[83] Stuart Murray, *Hope,* pg 7
[84] Ibid, pg 6
[85] Ibid, pg 24
[86] Paul Walker, *Church 2.0,* pg 76
[87] http://shanehipps.com/
[88] http://brownblog.info/?p=777
[89] See Appendix 1
[90] See Appendix 2

The fluidity of the current community and relative anonymity is a challenge to pastoral care. It is a problem to keep in touch with people who may have visited the cathedral regularly and then stop. It is possible to send messages but not everyone chooses to receive these by email and so they will not know about the message unless they go in-world. Avatars give clues about the person behind them but there is still a challenge in ministering to someone who might one day look like a person and the next like a cat. There is also some frustration in giving pastoral support to those it is not possible to meet. It is a challenge of adapting to the context, accepting its limitations and exploiting its strengths.

Andrew Carey said: 'The Archbishop of Canterbury once suggested that 'inclusion' was not a gospel value in and of itself. Christians, he suggested, should be talking about 'welcome' instead.'[91] In the attempt to welcome everyone it is possible for a group to lose its distinctiveness. Some boundaries may have to be imposed which allow AoSL to be inclusive but to retain our identity in Christ. It is both a challenge and an opportunity to work with leaders of different parts of the Anglican Communion and ecumenical partners. It will be necessary to be patient with one another and trust the Holy Spirit to help us with our differences. If as a ministry we can live out community despite differences, this has something positive to say to the world.

There is more to do as a community in finding opportunities to simply be together doing fun things. Our focus needs to widen beyond seeing services as the only way to be church. Michael Frost says, 'Even those who have ceased attending church services have great difficulty imagining what it means to church together without picturing a liturgical meeting of some kind.' [92] We have a long way to go at the cathedral before we realise a new way of being church, one based on relationships not meetings.

8.3 Mission

Jesus sent his disciples out to all the world, and the world of *SL* must surely be included. In one sense, the AoSL have gone to the world of *SL*, but for the first two years of existence this presence has been shaped by the foundational charter: *A Christian community for those who call themselves: Anglicans, Episcopalians or members of the Church of England, Episcopal Church or any of the other bodies of believers who share the Anglican heritage*. There is talk of those sheep in folds roughly defined by the Anglican Communion but no reference to those still wandering on the hills with no knowledge of a shepherd.

The focus of the charter is in tension with our vision statement which includes: Christians serving the Lord; engaging in relevant, meaningful and contemporary ways with society; offering those involved in *Second Life* an experience of a God who deeply loves them. We are challenged by Jesus who said that it is doing his work, not calling him Lord, which is

[91] *The Church of England Newspaper,* 27/03/09
[92] Michael Frost, *Exiles,* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), pg 277

genuine Christian discipleship. We are also challenged by the fact that a lot of sharing on the Internet is not of the sort that often leads to action.[93] Having spent two years building the group, AoSL needs to intentionally move into mission if it is not to become a club for the initiated. This is a risk but Jesus called his disciples to risk all in his service (Mark 1:17,18).

Jesus spent his time with people as they went about their everyday lives. He met with them and talked by the well, in the market place, in homes, on hillsides, on the beach. His ministry was essentially one of 'hanging out' with people and *SL* is an ideal environment in which to do that. Knowing the kind of issues members might come across, anyone going out to meet people where they are in-world will be going as sheep among wolves. It would be best to arrange for people to go out in twos as Jesus' disciples did and there would be a need for an opportunity to debrief. There should certainly prayer support. Building a committed prayer team is another challenge, though we have made a very good start.

Within AoSL we currently have no training to encourage members to engage in mission in the plentiful harvest of *SL*. The Saturday discussion group has the potential to be transformed into a more structured form rather than following whatever participants bring in a given week, or perhaps something new is needed. We need to learn more about *SL* and about how to minister within the culture while not conforming to its norms. The way that many of our members have come to us can leave them ignorant of the culture of *SL*. Those visiting our blog, having heard about us, are encouraged to come straight to Epiphany Island and get involved with the community there. It is just too easy to stay in the comfort of those surroundings and not venture further. There needs to be a place to discuss the issues involved and to share wisdom. For instance, Christian men in *SL* face particular difficulties as many are expected to ask women for sex. One member of AoSL specifies on his profile that he is *not* looking for sex. This problem would be avoided if men concentrated on meeting men but there are many lonely women who want a man to dance with and to talk to.

The central task we face is to make a community of disciples in a medium where community itself is difficult to make. Paul Watson of 'Reaching the Online Generation'[94] uses inductive Bible studies to develop non-Christians into doers of the Word. AoSL will need to provide some way of discipling new believers or seekers. We need disciples who are well equipped to take their new found faith into the communities in *SL* with which they already have connections. This might involve receiving training from Paul Watson, or joining with other churches to provide nurture, or both.

The ethical issues presented by living in a virtual world are enormous and need to be seriously engaged with. With such a range of Christian people available in-world, it should be possible to bring some together to think about the issues and to begin to create resources which help Christians to understand more about how biblical truth applies to virtual life. There is

[93] Paul Walker, *Church 2.0,* pg 47
[94] http://www.reachingtheonlinegeneration.com/

the opportunity to begin to engage with the less pleasant side of *SL* and to seek to change it for the benefit of residents.

The potential for sharing knowledge in *SL* means that we have the opportunity to equip our members to live better in RL also. It would be possible to have guest lecturers addressing environmental matters, poverty, climate change, the impact of globalisation and so on, from a Christian point of view. This would help to equip our members to engage in God's mission to defeat evil as it affects creation. Currently such matters are only touched on in the context of sermons and in the discussion group but they are not addressed in an intentional and organised way.

Assuming that we are successful in winning new people to Christ in *SL* there will be implications for what we offer them in terms of worship, prayer and community. A new ecclesiology may emerge if we give it a chance and accept the challenge of change.

8.4 Connection

The immediate challenge AoSL faces is the resignation of Mark Brown as priest-in-charge. It is recognised that sometimes a pioneer needs to move on to do more pioneering elsewhere, leaving what s/he started to grow to maturity under local leadership. This was the pattern that St Paul adopted. He planted churches and helped them to become established but then moved on to plant more. He did not abandon them but kept an interest through letters sent to the churches, helping them with problems, encouraging them in times of suffering. In the same way, Mark will remain as a consultant to the ministry.

The licensing of Mark's ministry in the Anglican Cathedral in *Second Life* brings that ministry under the authority of a RL diocese. Once Mark is no longer part of the ministry in an active role, we do not know what will happen to the link with Wellington diocese. It is the intention of AoSL to seek connection with RL dioceses around the world and also to have a bishop appointed as Visitor to keep us linked to the wider church. There is a link with Bishop Christopher Hill but when the steering group which has been meeting at Guildford winds up in the summer, once again we do not know where that will leave us. The fact that our ministry crosses geographical boundaries is a challenge for the Church as a whole not just for the Anglican Communion, one that needs to be resolved. John Drane considers that denominations as a will become less important and that forms of discipleship will emerge 'not only across theological traditions, but also across boundaries of time and space.'[95]

There is a wide range of views within the Anglican Communion on many matters of faith. The tensions are not something we can be completely free of in our work in *SL* and we are currently working on our mission statement in the hope of finding something authentically Anglican which

[95] John Drane, *After McDonaldization: Mission, Ministry and Christian Discipleship in an Age of Uncertainty,* (London, Darton Longman & Todd, 2008), pg 52

can hold us all together. Having some kind of accountability will ensure that leaders keep within acceptable theological bounds and the ministry remains recognisably Anglican. It is a challenge to maintain devotion to the truth of the Gospel in a free medium like the Internet so the accountability of leaders is vital.

New leaders will be needed in the future and we need to look at ways of validating their qualifications, though this may not necessarily include ordained status.[96] This issue of how people move into leadership in AoSL is one we are wrestling with currently, trying to find the balance between caution and encouragement.

In a RL church there is support available for the leaders, to ensure that they are cared for as they minister. Paul indicates in 1 Timothy 3:5 that leaders should look to putting their own life in order before caring for the Church. The intensity of interaction on the Internet and the fact that ministry can go on there 24/7 carries with it the risk of burnout. Who is going to monitor if leaders are building times of Sabbath rest into their lives? Ideally the leader of the ministry will be supported from outside the ministry in *SL* and will be free to support the other leaders on a pastoral level. How will this happen once Mark Brown leaves?

No one church can do everything. In fact one of the marks of a healthy church is that it does a few things well.[97] This indicates that it is essential to work with other churches. This can be a challenge as different churches may define the four dimensions of church differently from us. Meaningful unity will come not from structures but from shared values. Coming together will model the time when all will be one as described in Revelation 21. Currently AoSL does not work with other churches at all and faces suspicion from some due to the current tensions in the Anglican Communion. Overcoming such suspicion and finding a way to work together is a challenge we need to engage with soon.

[96] Stuart Murray, *Hope,* pg 16
[97] Robert Warren, *Healthy,* pg 44

9. Involvement with Anglicans of *Second Life*

In May 2005 a small article appeared in New Christian Herald stating that i-church[98] was now accepting applications from those who wished to join in order to offer something to the community. I applied immediately offering to help with resources and any desktop publishing and within hours had become an Individual Member of the community with the option of becoming a Community Member in the future.

I joined a Pastoral Group in July and also attended worship twice a day in the chat-room chapel. After a few months I began to lead worship occasionally and then regularly. I worked with another member to co-ordinate the prayer requests on the forums from January 2006 and in March became one of the worship co-ordinators, helping to build a team of 16 to lead services. In June 2006 I began to lead a Pastoral Group.

In April 2007 I was elected to the i-church Council and in July I became Lay Chairman of the Council, elected by Council members. I worked with the Assistant Pastor as we entered a time of interregnum, supported by Bishop Colin Fletcher of Dorchester and the Chair of the Trustees, Alastair Hunter. I continued in this role until a new Web Pastor was appointed in June 2008.

In my time as Lay Chairman, general enquiries came to me from our website. In October 2007 one of these enquiries was from Mark Brown, who had planted an Anglican church in *Second Life* and was interested in sharing ideas with i-church. As a result of our contact, I joined *Second Life* in order to learn more about the ministry. I attended services, some discussion groups and Bible studies, to get a flavour of the life of that community.

Mark was planning to come to England in May 2008 to attend a conference in Guildford hosted by Bishop Christopher Hill, entitled 'Web 2.0 and the Church'[99]. Mark Rudall, Director of Communications, and organiser of the conference, was happy for me to attend as a 'bridge' person, who had been involved in more than one ministry online.

Shortly after the Guildford conference, my commitments in i-church reduced considerably as a new Web Pastor was in post. I decided to offer to help more with the AoSL group, particularly in leading worship. In August I began to lead two services, on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, aimed at members in Europe and I joined the Leadership Team. Since the beginning of 2009 I have helped to lead the Sunday service also. I also help to lead the weekly Bible Study.

[98] See Appendix 1
[99] See Appendix 3

10. Relating Online and Face to Face Ministry

When I joined *Second Life* I made a point of choosing a name which connects closely with the 'real me'. I chose a surname from the list that is close to my maiden name and used the Christian name I was nearly given at birth. In my time of interacting online I have never sought to be other than myself and those who know me in RL and online confirm that there is congruence between my real and virtual identities. I would say that ministry online and in RL flow from and enhance one another, rather than being separate in any way. In both circumstances it is the same person who is ministering.

I began to preach many years ago as my vicar said he saw a talent for it in me. After a few uncomfortable months I withdrew from the preaching rota, convinced it was not for me. I did something similar to preaching when giving the talks on Cursillo weekends. I preached one sermon in church as part of exploring my vocation and prepared a substantial reflection for a quiet day which was planned for i-church. It was only when I began to lead services and preach in *SL* that everything began to come together for me and I realised I enjoyed preaching. Positive feedback from those who listened gave me confidence. This allowed me to be of help in my local church during our interregnum when no priest could be found to take a Sunday service. I had no qualms about preaching there. I also found that I had absorbed the need to take the context into account, something brought home to me when I preached on the same passages one Sunday both in RL and *SL*. I found myself adapting my message appropriately for my listeners. This was helpful when I was preparing a sermon for the All Souls' service in RL, where the context was different again.

Apart from working on a youth service, I had no experience of writing or leading services in church until the interregnum in my church in 2003. I then began writing family services, learning from the ones which had been done before. I found I enjoyed this and so also offered to put together the three hour service for Good Friday. This was the first chance I was given to lead a service. I also was involved with writing Candlemas and Christingle services. The early services I attended in i-church were based on Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. They were not ideal for a text only environment and were actually quite stressful to participate in due to the amount of typing involved. Over a period of months it seems that the Holy Spirit was leading the small group of us to gradually adapt to a simpler form. The pace of the worship was slower than I was used to in RL but I realised the power of the words as a result.

When I began writing my own services I bore the lessons I had learnt in mind. Leading in *SL* with both voice and text and with technology to help show the words on screen, allowed me to use a longer liturgy than in i-church. I based the services on the structure of an office as described by Robert Benson[100], something I had not studied before. This in turn has opened me to Common Worship offices which I use in an adapted form at

[100] Robert Benson, *In Constant Prayer,* (Nelson 2008), pg 34

times online. When asked to lead Morning Prayer in RL I was confident about putting a Common Worship service together as a result of my experience online. I have also noticed that I keep the pace slow in RL to allow the words to have their impact, as I have learnt in *SL*. The tradition in my church does not leave room for prayers offered by the congregation, unlike in *SL*, but I build a time of silent prayer into the office.

My own spiritual life was really enriched by the regular offices which were said in i-church, reaching five a day eventually to cater for different time zones. As a result of having this structure on offer, I found a rhythm in my daily life that was liberating and supportive. Online worship has taught me the need for and benefit of a regular pattern of prayer.

Currently I have no opportunity to lead Bible studies in my RL church, but I learnt how to lead them when I first attended a house group 20+ years ago. I have used those same skills in other churches since then and also in a Cursillo small group for many years. I participated in Bible studies in i-church, using text only, and learnt how to work in that environment. I have led Bible study in *SL* using both text and voice, sometimes simultaneously, and found no difficulty in transferring the skills to a new environment.

I have never had the opportunity to exercise pastoral care in any formal sense in a RL church, but do so in *SL*. With the approval of the Leadership Team I have offered regular counselling online to one person, and have also had some one off pastoral meetings. I originally trained as a counsellor to help me to be more effective as a Pastoral Group leader in i-church. I have been able to use that training in *SL*. I find in RL there are opportunities for informal pastoral encounters. I am particularly aware of this with the wedding couples I work with. After the All Souls' service I was expecting to find that someone needed some support and that was in fact the case. I think I am more attuned to the potential of chance encounters as a result of experiences in *SL*. Within *SL* people tend to be more open, which makes it easier to talk about faith I find. That in turn has built my confidence in talking about faith to those I meet in RL and has made it more likely that I will do so.

Much of the behind the scenes work in RL and *SL* is very similar. I have many years of experience on PCCs. I was on the i-church Council and am now a member of the Leadership Team of AoSL. Administrative tasks are much the same, and I have acted as secretary in RL, i-church and now in AoSL. I have compiled the parish profile for two RL churches and for i-church. Issues of finance come up in RL and *SL* also, although the sums of money involved are a great deal less in *SL* at the moment.

Within the Diocese of Wakefield there is currently a review process underway for all deaneries and parishes, looking to create a five year plan. The same sort of process has just been carried out with the AoSL using The Healthy Churches Handbook[101] and Transforming Lives[102]

[101] Robert Warren, *The Healthy Churches' Handbook,* (Church House Publishing, 2004)

materials from Wakefield Diocese as a basis for our discussions. The facilitation skills I have learnt as a staff member of the Wakefield Ministry Scheme have been used in discussions with members in-world as part of the review.

When in *SL*, the range of people who come to a worship service is much gwider than in RL. We meet people from all denominations and none. This requires an awareness of different experiences in order to make sure that everyone can participate easily in services. This is something that is also needed in RL, giving help to people and not assuming they know when to change from one piece of paper to another. I really enjoy being in contact with such a mixture of people. I similarly enjoyed being my church's representative to the local Churches Together group some years ago and took the opportunity to visit 5 different churches during a Lent course and Holy Week services. I appreciate the chance to work alongside a Methodist minister in leading services in the *SL* cathedral and to attend his services also.

Welcoming people to the *SL* cathedral before services is an important part of our ministry as is the time of fellowship afterwards. I have become more aware that the welcome in RL church often leaves something to be desired. I think this is a particular problem after the service when everyone is busy talking to their friends or catching up with others in order to complete tasks in a very short time-frame.

The greatest difference I have seen between online and RL ministry is one of opportunity. There appears to be far more openness to lay people being involved in ministry online. Although more and more priests are working collaboratively with their congregations, it still seems to be in interregna that lay people can finally use their skills more widely in the service of God and his people. Had I not had the chance to participate in online church, I would not have learnt as much about myself, my skills and what I can offer to the Church.

[102] http://www.wakefield.anglican.org/events/transforminglives/index.htm

Appendix 1

i-church

(www.i-church.org)

i-church is one of five Fresh Expressions of church to come out of the 'Cutting Edge Ministries' initiative of the Diocese of Oxford which was launched in 2002 and funded by the Church Commissioners.

In May 2004 the first Web Pastor of i-church was appointed, Alyson Leslie, a lay person from Scotland. On 30th July i-church was dedicated at a service led by the Bishop of Dorchester in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford. Richard Thomas, Communications Office for the Diocese of Oxford, gave the homily in which he told of the overwhelming numbers who had applied to join i-church. He also highlighted the features of Benedictine spirituality which would be particularly relevant to an online community, especially stability in what is inherently a medium where commitment is not common.

i-church defined its purpose in terms of who it was designed to reach, namely those wishing to explore Christian discipleship but who could not belong to a local church; those not finding all they needed in their local church; and those whose lifestyle includes travel and so could not easily link to a local church.

As a charitable company, i-church has a Board of Trustees appointed by the Bishop of Oxford. The Bishop of Dorchester is on the Board of Trustees and is Visitor for i-church. Day to day running is the responsibility of a Web Pastor (a half-time paid post) supported by a Council, which is similar to a PCC. The Web Pastor is an ordained person though the first one was a lay person. S/he is responsible for the vision of i-church and for supporting key volunteers. S/he reports to the Trustees regularly.

The structure of i-church is multi-layered, each layer less public than the one before. There is a public website with information about i-church. In recent months a public discussion forum has been started where members of the public can post questions and comments and where members of i-church engage also. People wishing for more involvement may apply to join as a member. If they do so, they will be able to see the discussion forums which can only be seen by members. As there is a limit to who can read what is posted there, there is an element of safety and privacy in sharing which allows for more intimate posting i.e. sensitive prayer requests. Instead of the whole world being able to read what is posted, the audience is limited to the few hundred members.

Originally the idea was that everyone who joined i-church would be in a small Pastoral Group where members could get to know one another well, and where the Pastoral Group leader would look after any needs they had for pastoral support. Each member was to develop a rule of life on Benedictine principles, looking at the areas of prayer, study and action. With the huge amount of interest in belonging to i-church, it was found to be impossible to find enough suitable Pastoral Group leaders to allow many people to join. The waiting list simply became longer and longer. Also, experience showed that not all members developed a rule of life, despite committing to do so, bringing into question if this was really the need of everyone who was interested in being part of i-church.

In May 2005 it was decided to create two types of membership, Community Members and Individual Members. This opened the door to new members who could join without being put in a Pastoral Group and who did not have to make the same commitment to the rule of life and supporting the community that the original members had made. This arrangement created another layer in the structure, with Community Members being able to see private forums just for their group and Individual Members seeing the generally available forums. This allowed an increase in numbers while maintaining the safer, more intimate groups for those who wanted them. Since a vision day held in January 2007, members have been able to be Community Members but not be in a Pastoral Group. There have also been other kinds of group developed, some of a pastoral nature such as the Vocations Group, and others based on interest such as Amateur Radio.

In addition to forums, there is a chat-room where members can meet for socialising or worship. For those who choose to use this facility, and it tends to be a minority of members, there is an opportunity to get to know others very well indeed. It is much easier to have a proper conversation rather than the asynchronous discussions in forums. Members have found real friendships developing very quickly and much informal pastoral care is carried out in this way. The Web Pastor is available for those who need more care on a one to one basis.

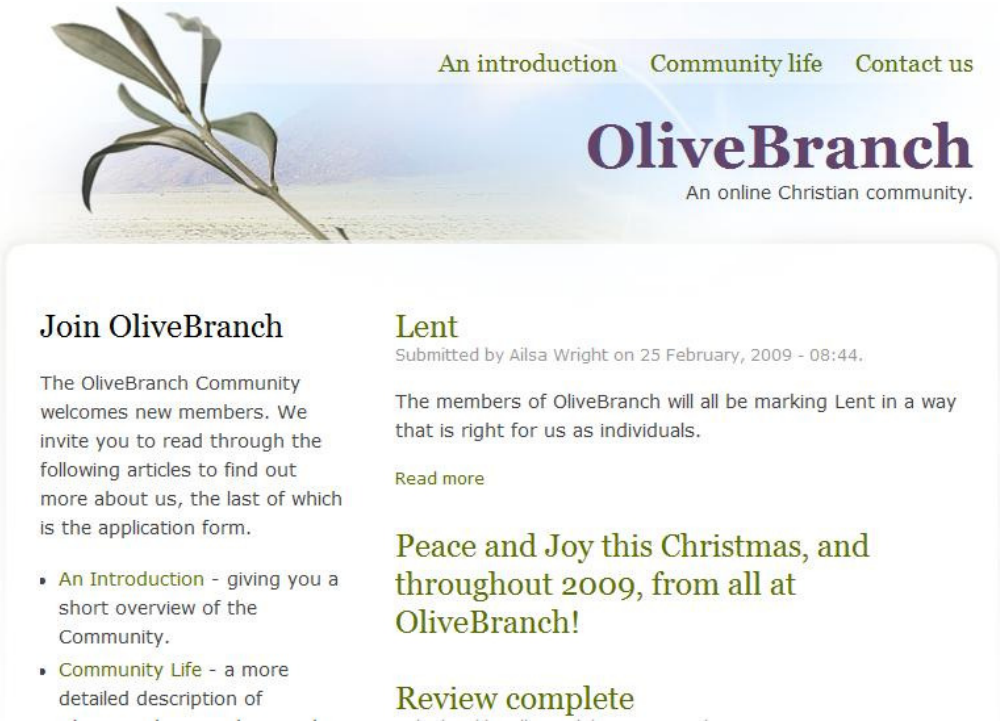
A survey of members in December 2006 showed that around 60% of the membership was based in the UK and another 20% in the USA. 60% of the members were male, which is unusual in a church. 10% were under 28 and 16% were 58 or older. 65% of members were Anglican with the others coming from a wide range of denominations. Roughly half of the members were attending a local church as well as being part of i-church, yet in total 93% had at some time attended a local church. It seems that i-church was reaching people who would be described as de-churched, people who might otherwise no longer have contact with any church. [103]

[103] Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (ed), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, (SCM 2008), pp 123-134

Appendix 2

OliveBranch

(www.obocc.org)



OliveBranch is a small online Christian community which I formed with a friend, Mark Gibbens, whom I had met through i-church when we worked together on the Council. The idea for an accountability group to aid the spiritual growth of members had been discussed in i-church for some time, coming to nothing as the structure at the time would not allow this. The existing Pastoral Groups were not designed for such a focus.

In Spring 2008 Mark and I began once more to share our wish to engage in a close small group with the purpose of spiritual growth. We decided to build the life of the community around the material in 'A Spiritual Transformation Workbook'[104]. In August 2008 we launched the website of OliveBranch, subtitled 'An online Christian community'. We agreed that there would be regular reviews of the community and that if it ceased to serve its purpose we would celebrate what had been good and move on.

The public website of OliveBranch gives information about the community and spells out the kind of commitment we ask members to make. There is an occasional update of our activity but no interaction with anyone visiting the site. So far there are 23 members, about half of whom are active on the site, some daily, some less frequently. There has been no active advertising of the community except by word of mouth and by way of details on our profiles on other websites.

The bulk of our community life is built on discussions which are divided into types. The spiritual formation sessions are spread over several weeks of posting to give members time to respond. As the details are there to be read at any time, people joining can respond to the sessions which started before they joined. There are journals where members can post their thoughts about the sessions or anything they wish and other members can respond to them with encouragement or insights. There are also 'conversations' where members post anything of interest to them. A section is available for prayer requests also.

Communication in a chat-room is only a small part of the interaction between members. We usually meet on Sunday evenings for worship and share the leadership between us. During Lent we have met each evening for a time of prayer and to meditate together on the Lent readings provided by the Diocese of Wakefield.[105]

There is a good sense of community, helped probably by the fact that several of us know one another. The group is small and what is shared is only seen by community members, giving a feeling of safety and intimacy. Members seem to have learnt about themselves and to have grown spiritually as a result of their membership. There is a high degree of self-awareness plus honesty and vulnerability. I find the personal journaling I do there very helpful indeed.

[104] James Bryan Smith with Lynda Graybeal, *A Spiritual Formation Workbook*, (Harper 1999)
[105] http://tinyurl.com/cp6wvt

Appendix 3

Web 2.0 and the Church

- **An intimate one day event to focus on the implications of Web.2.0, Second Life and the world of Virtual Church for the Church of England, the Anglican Communion and the wider Church.**

- **This table top conference brings together pioneer Web 2.0 practitioners with theological and missional thinkers, cultural observers and ecclesiastical lawyers.**

- **The aim is to produce effective 'apologetics' material to help project a completely new and emerging area of mission into wider consciousness, backed by understanding and support from more traditional areas of the Church.**

- **This event has not been 'branded' in any way because those attending come from a range of denominational and other backgrounds. All offer a breadth of input to kick-start production of resources to support an area of ministry which, for many in the Church, is currently hidden from view.**

Date: *Saturday 24 May 2008*

Timing:
Assemble at 9.45am for a 10.30 start and aim to finish by 4.00pm

Venue:
Willow Grange, the home of the Rt Revd Christopher Hill, Bishop of Guildford

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