The theology of working online

Deanna Thompson concludes in her book *The Virtual Body of Christ*:[i]

> "Ours is a world being remade by digital technology and virtual interactions. This new world brings with it liabilities and losses. At the same time, new possibilities for supporting one another during the worst [and best] times of our lives… It is important for Christians to recognise that the Body of Christ has always been a virtual body and that, in this digital age, incarnational living must be understood as incorporating virtual as well as face-to-face interactions."

Many more of us now clearly recognise that we remain fully human and fully alive in our direct digital encounters with others, and are able to ensure the value of every individual's voice to the whole and that no one is excluded.

With the development of smart phones and superfast internet provision, we are more connected with others than at any other point in history. Collaborating and meeting with others online has come to the fore, not least since the global Covid-19 pandemic, when so many people were forced into remote working.

The underlying theological premise of working online is that of mission Dei – God's presence through the Spirit, at work actively recreating and redeeming in all spaces throughout the world. Digital technology has opened up the possibility for many of authentic relationships, the power of encountering Jesus and the possibility of being present and connected to others.

In Mark 2:1-12, a group of friends are so concerned about someone that they go to extraordinary lengths to enable an encounter with Jesus (lowering their friend on a bed before Jesus' feet). Jesus uses the encounter to bring the sick friend into fullness of life, as well as physical wellbeing. In the same way that the people bring their friend to the feet of Jesus, so digital tools and the online space have enabled folk to encounter Jesus on their own terms. Indeed, theologically reflective and physically safe spaces online have been developed significantly thanks to the work and praxis of those living with chronic or life-limiting conditions.

For many people, the online space is where they feel most safe and most alive – especially those who have life limiting conditions or live with chronic pain and anxiety. Online spaces enable the full participation of those who would otherwise find connection difficult. They can also be spaces of deep spiritual enquiry, multimedia reflective practice, and secure networking.

The online space is, theologically, no different to the offline or onsite space. It is a place where people encounter Jesus, where God is constantly creative, and where a language of loving presence is ever discernible. Our experiences in prayer and in the real presence of Christ in Holy Communion are yet more examples of how we meet with God in ways that are non-physical yet remain core means of grace to us.

Themes of authenticity, integrity, embodiment, encounter, presence and loving connection are familiar themes of discipleship (and indeed of supervision). We may interact differently online, but we are still invited to be fully present and fully known there. Indeed, we are able to focus our attention on another in a close, accessible way.

Talking about digital theology invites us to engage in a conversation about justice, inclusion and accessibility – being mindful of some of the more challenging features of online spaces: not least digital poverty, competence, and the abuses of power which are inherent.

Just as the friends, in the account in Mark 2, lowered their friend on a bed, so too are we to carry people into an encounter with Jesus – using the tools that offer them the comfort and confidence to be themselves. Digital tools are one way of doing that. The challenge in supervision is to use these tools well, effectively, affectively, and creatively – rather than as a short-cut for our engagement with each other.

> "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:12)

> "Digital communication allows for communication with those we cannot speak to already. It allows us to break out of the same old voices feeding into our worship. Guest speakers can be invited from all over the world (using tools such as Skype); the housebound can be invited to both enjoy and participate in church services (using tools such as live streaming). People can request and be offered prayer, whenever and wherever it is needed, notices can be texted out, offerings given through digital banking, and share the fullness of discipleship living through all kinds of media. People are no longer limited to their geographical or 'Sunday' lives, which allow churches to put into practice whole-life community, actively engaging with what is going on in the world, to listen and to respond with what is going on in local, national and international communities in ways that are meaningful to those who are listening." [i]

Please note the Methodist Church social media guidelines, which suggest ways in which we might behave well online: www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/guidance-for-churches/digital-communication-guidance-for-churches/social-media/social-media-guidelines/

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[i] www.researchgate.net/profile/Asher-Rospigliosi/publication/270892426_ePub-European_Conference_on_Social_Media_ECSM/links/57bd70ac08ae37ee394b9871/ePub-European-Conference-on-Social-Media-ECSM.pdf#page=301 Bex Lewis, (page 281).