Faith Formed by
The Virtual Body of Christ:
Christian Identity in a Wired World

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Embraced by the Virtual Body of Christ

- Stage IV cancer diagnosis at 42
- Caring Bridge—www.caringbridge.org
- The arms of Christ embracing us virtually, actually
- Expanding the boundaries of the body of Christ
Five Points of Theological Reflection on Faith Formation and the Virtual Body of Christ

1. Theological reflection on Christian identity in the 21st century must acknowledge that the virtual world IS our world, that “augmented reality” IS our reality
• 1. no longer “go online”—we’re already there, most of the time

• 2. language continues to evolve to better match reality: less “virtual world vs. actual world,” more “augmented reality”
• What does it mean for Christian faith and identity to be formed in this context?

Jason Byassee: Christians ought not to reject totally or simply baptize it: “it’s a new dimension of Christ and culture”
• 2. Theological reflection on Christian identity as the body of Christ will be enhanced by acknowledging that the body of Christ has always been a virtual body.
a. Apostle Paul, image of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12.12-27, Rom. 12.4-5)

• How does Paul help form the faith and identity of the earliest Christian communities he visits only a few times?

• Byassee again: He’s present with them virtually, through letters that are read aloud and become integral to forming the body.
B. Paul’s virtual presence through letters had material implications for becoming the body of Christ
• 3. Theological reflection on Christian identity as the church needs to go beyond “digital strategies” to imagining new ways of being church in and through virtual reality.
• A. Digital strategy: necessary but not sufficient

• “strategies and best practices for a post-website world”
  – David Bourgeois
• B. Going (way) beyond digital strategies to extending the body of Christ into virtual spaces

• GRANGER COMMUNITY CHURCH, INDIANA—

--using “The Table”—private online network for churches

---prayer requests on infertility—12 couples now connected through the virtual body of Christ
4. Theological reflection on Christian identity as the body of Christ leads to greater appreciation of the material effects of virtual incarnations of Christ.
• When the church is being the church it is the hands and feet of Christ, ministering to those who suffer.

• Kathryn Reklis challenges conventional views of virtual vs. actual reality as disembodied (bad) vs. embodied (good)

My own experience of the virtual body of Christ suggests profound, positive material care can come from virtual connections.
5. Theological reflection on Christian identity in the digital age calls on the body of Christ to cultivate attentiveness toward God and the world God loves.
• A. More from Reklis:
  • Rather than disembodiment it’s dissipation of attention and energy.
  • We’re present to too many at the same time.
Mark 10.46-52

- B. Jesus’ attentiveness calls us to be attentive too

- Verse 49: Jesus stood still and called the blind beggar over

- Simone Weil: “attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity”

- Attending to new shapes of Christ’s body in virtual space