

2009

A Church without walls: Finding community in Central Christian Church's online campus

Kayla Jo Gilmore
University of Nevada Las Vegas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Gilmore, Kayla Jo, "A Church without walls: Finding community in Central Christian Church's online campus" (2009). *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones*. 114.
<https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations/114>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

A CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS: FINDING COMMUNITY IN CENTRAL
CHRISTIAN CHURCH'S ONLINE CAMPUS

by

Kayla Jo Gilmore

Bachelor of Arts
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
2001

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the

**Master of Arts Degree in Journalism and Media Studies
Hank Greenspun Department of Journalism and Media Studies
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs**

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December 2009**

Copyright by Kayla Jo Gilmore 2010
All Rights Reserved



THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend that the thesis prepared under our supervision by

Kayla Jo Gilmore

entitled

A Church without Walls: Finding Community in Central Christian Church's Online Campus

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Journalism and Media Studies

Journalism and Media Studies

Daniel A. Stout, Committee Chair

Gary W. Larson, Committee Member

Stephen Bates, Committee Member

Ted Jelen, Graduate Faculty Representative

Ronald Smith, Ph. D., Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies
and Dean of the Graduate College

December 2009

ABSTRACT

**A Church Without Walls: Finding Community in
Central Christian Church's Online Campus**

by

Kayla Jo Gilmore

Dr. Daniel Stout, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of Journalism and Media Studies
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Churches today are expanding beyond the physical walls of a church building. They are now online and interactive. This study explores the differences and similarities of communities of online churches and their physical church locations. It incorporates Stanley Fish's interpretive community theory by looking at Thomas Lindlof's common elements of a community and characteristics of an interpretive community. Using an ethnographic approach, survey and interviews were conducted to collect the data. Conclusions include determining that Central's online and physical church communities are in fact interpretive communities and that the online church is not replacing the physical church, but supplementing it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
About Central	4
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
Interpretive Community Theory	13
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY.....	18
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY	21
Survey Analysis	21
Interview Data Analysis	22
Community Elements	23
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS.....	35
APPENDICES.....	41
1. Survey questions	41
2. Interview questions	46
3. IRB Approval, Informed Consent, & Letter of Authorization.....	48
REFERENCES.....	53
VITA	55

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

From getting information about other religions to participating in online services, the Internet has changed religious life for many people. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 64% of Internet users (about 82 million) have used the Internet to get spiritual or religious information (Hoover, 2004). While this number increases by the day, churches are realizing that if they want to stay relevant to popular culture, they must embrace new technology. For example, Minger (2007) states, “Web 2.0 is all about relationships online, and the church that ventures into building an online, interactive presence is the church that will win – it’s a church that will disciple a Web generation that exists around the world” (pg. 30). Church websites are not enough anymore. People want to interact with each other.

There are currently twelve churches in the world attempting this online, interactive presence with what they call Internet (or online) campuses. “...an Internet campus is more than having a live streaming video -- it's adding live interactive features like lobby chat room, message notes, communication card, raise a hand, say a prayer, and even online giving. Some have on-going ministry during the week with attenders by forming small groups or service projects” (Leadership Network, 2007). Thousands of people have already experienced life change from these online churches. “One prediction projects that 10% of Americans will rely exclusively on the Internet for their religious experience by 2010” (Leadership Network, 2007).

Some churches can only be found online, but others have online campuses in addition to their other physical locations. For example, Central Christian Church currently

has four locations: its main campus in Henderson, Nevada; a Summerlin campus on the west side of Las Vegas; a Southwest campus in Las Vegas; and an online campus located at centralonlinecampus.com. Therefore, an “online campus” is a regional site of a larger, multi-site church.

Though still in its early stages, these Internet campuses have been largely successful with members all over the world. However, one theological critique of church online is that computer-mediated communication (or virtual community) cannot replace face-to-face community. Computer mediated communication (CMC) is any form of human interaction over two more networked computers. CMC formats are generally understood as emails, chat rooms, instant messages, or text messaging. Research in CMC largely focuses on the social effects computer technologies. Much of the interaction on online campuses is CMC. The people who interact through CMC are often referred to as a “virtual community” or “online community” as opposed to a “face-to-face community.”

In his book *Cyberchurch*, Patrick Dixon states, “We are brothers and sisters to each other, in close relationship, with eternal bonds of mutual communication and self-sacrifice...None of this can be fulfilled merely by virtual reality friendships, where people can unplug the modem whenever they feel like giving up on people” (pg. 94). Clough (2002) is also concerned that they anonymity of the Internet will cause irresponsibility in community.

Some critics think CMC is impersonal, but there are increasing numbers of studies that prove virtual communities are just as personal as face-to-face communities. Other studies show it is even more personal than face-to-face communities (Walther, 1996). Hutchings (2007) notes, critiques of CMC have been made without serious study and

supporting data of actual online communities. More academic studies within Journalism and Media are needed to understand online, spiritual communities. The enormous number of people searching for religious information and spiritual guidance online is enough to warrant a research project.

From a personal perspective, I currently work for Central Christian Church. We are a non-denominational, contemporary Christian church and currently have four campuses, including one online. It is my goal in this thesis to take an in-depth look at how online, religious communities work, whether the community is real or not, and how people experience religion online so that I can understand our online campus community better and help facilitate a great online experience for them.

My involvement with the church I am studying is both a limitation to the study and a benefit. On one hand, Central is very accessible to me because I am on staff. This will make the project go easier and smoother. On the other, although I will try to remain as objective as possible, it is possible that my bias may show in the study.

Similar to Hutchings' (2007) research, this thesis is a study on religious communities in online campuses. The first part explains who Central is from a historical perspective and discusses its religious beliefs. The next two sections include a historical view of religion online from its beginning in the 1980's to current use and a look at past studies on religion online. Then I discuss Stanley Fish's interpretive community theory and how it relates to the present study, followed by a methodology section that describes that the method used in the study, Bainbride's use of ethnography in Internet-based studies. Next are the actual survey tool and the interview questions. Then a data analysis is conducted, followed by conclusions.

An interpretive community is a group of people who interpret, use, and engage media in similar ways. Central Christian Church's online community is an interpretive community because they gather together in one place (the online campus) to share in Christian worship and teaching experience via video technology. They engage with the media and each other by chatting online, praying and encouraging each other, singing, giving an offering, and watching a teaching message together. According to Lindlof (2002), communities have a set of common elements and certain propositions that defines them. One purpose of this study is to determine if Central's online community fits any of these common elements or propositions.

Another purpose is to look at how Central's online community differs (if at all) from its face-to-face community, also using Lindlof's common elements and propositions. We have a general sense of how physical communities operate because they have been around so long, but since online communities are relatively new, we do not know as much about them. This study will compare and contrast the two communities, as individuals in both will be interviewed. Central is a great place to study because it is on the cutting edge of technology with the online campus, as only a handful of churches have online campuses.

About Central

The case study is Central Christian Church. It began in 1962 with just 24 members meeting in a small downtown Las Vegas building. Though small in number, these members believed in the message of God's love and reaching out to others. In 1970, they moved to a new building and continued to invite their friends to church. In the 1980's and 90's, as Las Vegas grew, so did Central – they were setting up and tearing down 950

folding chairs each week by the end of the 20th century. So in 1999, Central moved to a new campus off Russell Road and the 95, where they built a much-needed auditorium that seated 3,000 people. The address of the new campus was 1001 New Beginnings Drive as Central wanted to be a place for people to experience New Beginnings.

In September of 2006, Central became one church in two locations as they opened up a second location in Summerlin – on the west side of Las Vegas. The church continued to grow and operated eight weekend services between their two campuses. With the success of the Summerlin campus, Central decided to remain a multi-site church and opened a Southwest campus in Las Vegas and an online campus in September of 2008. Led by Senior Pastor Jud Wilhite, Central’s mission is to “connect the unconnected to Christ and together grow to full devotion to Him” (centralchristian.com, 2008). Since it has been around for 47 years, we understand the inner workings of Central’s community.

Central’s online campus launched in September of 2008. Located at centralonlinecampus.com, the website encourages users to create a profile with a picture. This allows them to chat, blog, and communicate with others. Users can also log on anonymously. Once a profile is created, users can join the virtual lobby where they connect and meet new people, ask questions, or just read what others are posting. If users are having technical difficulty, they can chat with a live help desk and get their questions answered. If people need prayer, they can chat with a live person who will pray for them right there in real time or if they have questions about the church or want to get in a small group, a person is there to help them. Services are only at certain times, so people have a chance to experience the service with others in a community. An example is their opportunity to chat with others. Once the video starts, people often say hi to each other and

comment on certain parts of the service, like if they enjoy the song or the pastor's message. And the conversations continue throughout the service. Less than a year after being launched, approximately 2,000 people attend Central's services online on any given weekend. Together at all four campuses, Central serves about 16,000 people each weekend.

Being around for less than a year, Central's online community is relatively new compared to its physical, face-to-face community. Many financial and staff resources go into making the online campus function, so it is important for the church to understand what the community is like and if the users are having a good experience. This relates to the study in that it is beneficial for Central to know what the differences are between its offline and online community.

Knowing Central's beliefs is important because some of them might come up during the interview portion of the study. Central is a non-traditional, contemporary church that is non-denominational. They believe in God as the Creator and Ruler of the universe and he exists in three forms, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus paid for the sins of the world by dying on the cross and rising from the dead on the third day. He ascended into heaven and will someday return to earth to reign. Central believes the Holy Spirit is at work within each Christian, guiding them to do what is right. The Bible is God's Word and is the supreme source of truth for Christian beliefs and living. All people are made in the image of God, but marred by sin, which separates people from God. Salvation is by grace, through faith. Good works cannot save people. Central offers baptism as a way to publicly show faith. Central also believes people will exist in eternity with God in heaven through salvation by grace or separated from him in hell. The church on earth is the body of Christ.

It is here to share the news of Jesus Christ to the world, teach followers to obey the Bible, and equip people for ministry (centralchristian.com).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before we can look at religion online today, it is important to see how it has progressed over time to better understand how people use it. Religion surfaced on the Internet in the early 1980s. Bulletin board systems (BBSs) began on Communication Tree and religious discussions started on Usenet. The “net.religion” discussion list was used for conversations regarding religion, ethics, and morality. In 1986, a landmark event occurred for religion on the Internet when an online memorial service was conducted for the space shuttle crew of the Challenger (Campbell, 2004). The service “demonstrated the power of the computer medium to unite a community in a time of crisis beyond the limits of geography or denomination” (Lochhead, 1997).

Throughout the 1990’s, more religious groups and mailing lists could be found online. In 1992, American Presbyterians established the first virtual Christian congregation called “The First Church of Cyberspace” at www.godweb.org. The media recognized the Internet was being used as a spiritual space when Time magazine wrote the article “Finding God on the Web.” It stated,

And now we stand at the start of a new movement in this delicate dance of technology and faith: the marriage of God and the global computer networks. There's no sure way to measure how much the Internet will change our lives, but the most basic truth about technological revolutions is that they change everything they touch (Ramo, 1996).

Since then, many religions emerged online with things like cyberchurchers, cybertemples, online rituals, and online religious communities. Users can now find Bible study tools and various translations online. Ancient religions like Wicca and new religions

such as technopaganism are on the Internet now too. Beliefnet.org offers Internetworking for a “multi-faith e-community” (Campbell, 2004).

The first Internet tragedy was Heaven’s Gate, which supported themselves through their web design company called Higher Source. In 1997, thirty-nine of their members were found dead. Their vision online ended in a three-day long death ritual (Brasher, 2001). Without their online presence, the physical community may never have existed.

In the 21st century, the multi-site church exploded and continues to grow today with more than 1,500 multi-site churches in the United States. One way multi-site churches are expanding across time and space is through online campuses. There are currently 12 online campuses with more coming. These campuses allow for churches to reach members and guests who either miss a weekend service at their local church, want to invite their friends and family to their church, or even live thousands of miles away (<http://digital.leadnet.org/2007/10/index.html>, 2007).

People participate through the online campuses from all over the world. Many people watch it at the same time with friends and family members who do not live near them. Then they can discuss what they learned or liked and share the experience. This provides them with a way to go to church together without being in the same location. For example, one Central woman said, “My husband is a tour pilot and has a base in Henderson. He's been attending the Saturday Night Service. The online campus allows us to attend services 'together'. Then we talk about the service together.” Many people enjoy the service so much, they come back for more than one service. One participant said, “I can’t get enough of Central. This is my 6th service for today. I have already registered for the online missions trip in March.” Users form a community by sharing information about

themselves on their profiles, chatting together online, praying for one another, and much more (centralonlinecampus.com).

While there are a number of studies done on religion and the Internet, there is very little research specific to online campuses. Hutchings (2007) used a case-study approach to researching three online churches. He concludes, "...an experience of immersion in an environment is possible, indeed common, and first-person interviews with online churchgoers confirm that this immersion can lead to a powerful emotional commitment and experiences of sacred space" (pg. 257). Hutchings suggests further research is needed to establish just how successful these churches really are, but the initial research suggests hope for the future of online worship.

Campbell (2005) used online participant-observation, email questionnaires, and face-to-face interviews over a four-year period to study online Christian communities. She found the online community to be a story-formed one, where members co-create a communal identity that gives them personal and corporate meaning. She states, "This exploration of spiritual and social relationship building through computer networks provides a snapshot of the social changes occurring not only within religion, but also within wider society" (pg. 195). Campbell thinks the Internet and online communities offer a "...valuable space for a reflection on the evolving shape of religious culture, contemporary society, and on what it truly means to be in community" (pg. 195).

Studies on religion and the Internet cross global and religious boundaries. Clarke (2007) researched three Chinese Catholic web sites in 2005 using fieldwork and one-on-one interviewing techniques. Clarke attempts to prove Palmer's research wrong. Palmer felt the web undermined collective rituals and doctrine and weakened the Chinese Catholic

community. Based on Clarke's description of the three websites, none of them utilized interactive tools such as blogs or chats. They were simply informational only. Unlike Palmer, he felt each website strengthened the community, concluding, "...these websites have created virtual communities within which education, evangelism and encouragement can occur" (pg. 469).

Fernback (2002) studied CMC on three, neopagan websites over a period of several months. She followed a traditional ethnography and conducted virtual interviews and lurked on discussion groups. She did not participate in the discussions, but did clearly state her objectives and intentions. Neopagans are interesting to study online because many believe that technology alienates humans from nature and nature is where they find their spirituality. However, Fernback argues that cyberspace operates as a parachurch for neopagans, which is a place for them to have religious experiences outside of a church or other communal place of worship. This is important for them because many neo-pagans are closeted in the United States, where conservative, religious groups dominate (Fernback, 2002). By using CMC, neopagan communities actually foster face-to-face gathering because otherwise, these people may have never met. Fernback (2002) concludes, "CMC is an environment, a placeless realm where meaningful individual and collective experiences happen among the invested members. To the extent that some of these experiences are liminal, religious consciousness is sustained, new cultural possibilities are unveiled, and a profound sense of *communitas* is cultivated" (pg. 270).

Christianity is not the only religion on the Internet by any means. One-quarter to one-third of the world's population are Muslim and the Islam religion is finding its way online. Popular Muslim websites include islam.org, islamic.org, islamicity.org,

ais.org/~islam/, iiit.org/introduction.htm. Lawrence (2002) describes the conflicts between different Muslim groups on the Internet and believes it broadens the appeal of Islam.

Lawrence has two concerns for the Islamic religion online. To be truly Muslim, cyberspace must be monitored and because not all Muslims have access to the Web, there is a preselection of Muslim perspectives. So in the end, Lawrence is primarily concerned with authority on the Internet.

In an article discussing American freethinkers and their use of the Internet, Nash (2002) uses a website, www.infidels.org, to find email addresses to send his survey to. He contends that unlike previous generations who saw social and cultural change as negative, contemporary Christians are actively using new media like film, television, video, and the Internet in conducting religious services and as a tool for evangelism. In response to this, he argues that atheists have become more open on the Internet and need to continue to express their opinions online in order to stay engaged with Christians.

Before moving to theory, we should consider how to define community and religious community. Peter Berger (1967) is a widely known and accepted sociologist of religion. In his book, *The Sacred Canopy*, he claims man is a world builder and social being and that it is in man's nature to construct social worlds. This provides us with society (or community). For Berger, "religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established" (pg. 25). So the world is full of sacred mystery and power. Religion has a power "to locate human phenomena within a cosmic frame of reference" (pg. 35). This helps socialized individuals feel at peace and secure in society.

Classical work like Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and more followed by Berger's work sets a few precedents important to this study. First is the commitment to the scientific

study of society. And second "...classical sociology work was interpretive...a theoretical concern with interpreting the subjective meanings and motives of social actors" (Hunter & Ainlay, 1986). In other words, classical sociologists asked questions like, "Why?" or "So what?" We'll see in the next section how this is important to the theory driving this research. And finally, classical sociologists desired to make sense of the modern world. As online churches are relatively new to society and on the forefront of leading technology, this research fits the desire to make sense of the modern world.

Interpretive Community Theory

As noted above, this study will use interpretive community theory to understand Central's online campus community. In 1976, Stanley Fish coined the term "interpretive community" in his article "Interpreting the Variorum." Lindlof (2002) begins his study on interpretive community by focusing on the word community, which can be a complicated term. He believes community can be characterized by a set of common elements. First, community is based on a unity of shared circumstances, customs, interests, and purposes. Second, a community has moral obligations that the members share, such as rules, codes, and etiquette. Third, a community must have some sort of stability over time, which can be aided by establishments of sacred icons, rituals, myths, and canonical texts. And fourth, community furnishes the communicative occasions and codes that create social actors to coordinate their actions and to recognize who is inside or outside their membership. According to Benedict Anderson's 1991 study, face-to-face relations are not necessary for a sense of community to arise – it can be done through mass media and community networks. Lindlof's interpretive community theory connects to Berger's work on

community and religious community by interpreting the subjective meanings and motives of social actors.

Lindlof believes the local community has been threatened by the advancement of mass media. He says, “The interpretive community concept brings the trope of community to the microsocial level and provides a way to consider the social formation of audiences in a more organic sense.” And, “Simply put, an interpretive community is a collectivity of people who share strategies for interpreting, using, and engaging in communication about a media text of technology” (pg. 64). These strategies are considered community property and evolve in the community through innovation and the influence of argument. The purpose of this research is to explore whether Central’s online interpretive community is a hard community in terms of whether or not it has shared purposes, common rules, rituals, codes, and strong relationships as Lindlof suggests.

Some of theory is still contested and ambiguous after 15 years of research, however most researchers agree on the following propositions. First, interpretive community has sets of strategies that can be found in tactical readings of texts by individuals and groups. Or in other words, members of the community use the media in ways that are recognized and valued by others. Second, texts must have polysemic potential, meaning they can have multiple interpretations with different audiences. Third, communities vary in their intentions and how self-conscious they are. Some are public and stable and others are not. According to Lindlof, interpretive communities in media may be less stable over time than traditional communities. Fourth, interpretive communities are identified as an audience by a genre. Communities can form from preexisting groups or restricting media use. Finally, interpretive communities are multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory. Unity in

face-to-face community may not be in media-based community. Lindlof (1998) says if members can come and go, if they are not required to chat or post comments, if they can remain anonymous, or if their identities are not verified, then the traditional sense of community can be severely weakened.

Interpretive community theory is a theory because not everyone agrees with its use. First and foremost, there is a lack of historical, cultural, and social context in theory and research. Social actors are ahistorical and free floating, ignore the power of the media, and read anything they want from a media text. Another critique of the theory is that it focuses too much on the text-reader relation, making the community “sociologically thin.” And finally, some theorists are concerned over the validity of the theory. For example, Evans (1990) study suggested that interpretive community theory would remain contested until researchers can learn to control social structures like race, economic class, and gender.

This theory has been fairly successful in research with regards to genre communities, historical communities, institutional communities, and virtual communities. Genre communities are good starting points for researching audience tastes, uses, classifications, and discourses. They can range from romance and science fiction readers to fans of television shows. Research on religious communities and their use of specific genres is limited, although there are many genre fans and audiences in the religious community. The challenge to this research is going beyond just their initial reactions to the text and to dive deeper into the historical and socioculture effects of the text. Another form is historical communities. Audience studies can be done in the present even if the text is in the past using interpretive community theory. Resources like archival records, newspaper

articles, and audience measurement data can be used to study shifts in the audience's response. This perspective of course is limited to the data the researcher can find.

Another community that can be studied using the interpretive concept is that of any institutions. Studies have been done on media workers, book publishers, fellowship groups, and even child care centers. There are many groups in our society that can influence the religious community about television and media. And finally, Lindlof (2004) cites virtual communities as part of the interpretive approach. When CMC like email and chat groups become dense and long lasting, the groups participating in them can be called virtual communities. Most of the time, the interactions of these groups are asynchronous, acorporal, and anonymous. Lindlof states,

...we are only starting to learn how these features affect such aspects as the coming and going of members, how they know the identity of the other members (and whether this always matters), and how a virtual community conducts itself in such vital areas as resolving conflicts and deciding the things that are of importance to its membership (pg. 70).

Church services and rituals online bring new areas to for communication research. There are legal and physical barriers to contend with, as well as a potential for religions to alienate and inflame as much as inspire and inform. There are neopagan websites that can work against religious websites. Issues often resemble locality-globalization, authenticity-artificiality, and trust-disbelief. But the most difficult study may be how the online religious community relates with the offline religious institutions. With respect to all four communities, the current study on Central's online community is best suited for the virtual community, although it could also spill over to the institutional community as people may be there because they like Central as a whole church.

One example of how interpretive community theory works within religious studies is in Stout's 2004 study of Mormons in Las Vegas. To understand how Mormons related with the Las Vegas media environment, Stout analyzed their interpretive community. His findings suggest, "that interpretive communities can form around secular media use as a means of religious empowerment" (pg. 72).

Past research on online religious communities and Lindlof's interpretive community theory lays the groundwork for this research as it looks at whether Central's online community is an interpretive community based on Lindlof's definition and how the online community differs from its face-to-face community using the following methodology.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Bainbridge (2007a) presents online research methodologies that could be used to study religious activity. His collection of pilot studies discusses religious implications of video games through the methods of content analysis, natural language processing, ethnography or participant observation, and online interviewing. The researcher spent more than 400 hours in World of Warcraft and Second Life to complete an extensive ethnography. They also conducted unstructured interviews with priests, avatars, and visitors in these virtual worlds.

In a different article, Bainbridge (2007b) discusses Internet-based methods of studying religion online: online questionnaires, recommender systems, website link analysis, and social geography based on variables called from the Internet. He found these four methods to be solidly connected to traditional social-science methodologies, and states, “These are novel data-collection methodologies, with their own distinctive mixtures of advantages and disadvantages, that together offer great opportunities for effective but relatively low cost empirical studies of a variety of religious and parareligious phenomena” (pg. 18). Considering both of these articles, Bainbridge concludes his methods are solid for studying religious topics online.

Lindlof would agree with Bainbridge’s choice of ethnography for online research. Interpretive analysts research the process of mediated communication through social relationships. They ask questions like, “What is going on here? ... How do they do it? How does it change over time? How do they evaluate what they do? What does it mean to them? How do they interpret what it means to others? ... What is the relation of us to them, of self

to other?” (Lindlof, 1998). Ethnography can help the researcher engage in these types of questions.

Following Lindlof and Bainbridge’s ethnographic suggestions and after receiving IRB approval on April 3, 2009, by the Office of the Protection of Research Subjects at UNLV, an online survey was posted on Central Christian Church’s online campus (see Appendix I for survey). During the host announcement time of the service, users were asked to participate in the survey. The link to the survey was also emailed to all Online Campus registrants. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous and no compensation was given for participation. A pilot study was conducted before the survey was posted to work out any missing details. The primary reason for the survey was to identify participants for the interview portion of the study. Nonetheless, it also provided data to help understand Central’s online community.

There were three qualifying factors for participants to be asked to do the interview: they must be part of the offline and online Central communities, they must be an active member (i.e. length of participation) of both communities, and a mix of genders and ages will be selected for the interviews. After the survey was complete, I pilot tested the interview questions with two volunteers who are a part of Central. After making some tweaks to the questions, the interview questions were ready. I selected 12 people of mixed ages and races that had agreed on the survey to participate in further research. I emailed them to ask if they would be willing to come in to Central for a 45-minute to one-hour interview. If they agreed, they came in for an interview in a closed office setting to ensure privacy. I asked them to sign the IRB consent form and let them know their answers are confidential. While I asked the questions, I tape recorded their answers. See Appendix II

for the questions. Once the interview was over, I transcribed the answers and then identified common themes for analysis. I also showed the data to a panel of 3 people to see if they identified the same themes or found any new ones.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Survey Analysis

The primary reason for conducting the survey was to identify interview participants. After two weeks of being up on centralonlinecampus.com, 177 people completed the survey. This is about 10% of the Online Campus participants. Demographic questions were asked as optional questions. Almost 63% of the respondents were female. The highest number of age ranges were from 26-30 and 51-55. Surprisingly the 51-55 age group was the highest at 15.6%. Over half the respondents were married. 71% of the group considered themselves non-denominational Christian with the next highest category at 11.8% and evangelical Christian. 72% were white. Survey takers were from all over the United States and various countries like Jamaica, Canada, Spain, and more. It is important to note here that these demographics are of the respondents of the survey and not for the Online Campus as a whole.

Although the online survey's primary role was to help find interview candidates, it does provide some important information. First of all, as noted above, Lindlof believes interpretive communities are overlapping. The overwhelming majority (89%) of survey respondents already have attended a Central campus at some point (even perhaps just for one weekend as a visit) and half of those attend their particular campus every weekend. This shows the offline and online communities of Central are in fact overlapping.

Also mentioned above, Lindlof (1998) says if members in media-based communities can come and go, if they are not required to chat or post comments, if they can remain anonymous, or if their identities are not verified, then the traditional sense of

community can be severely weakened. 74% of the survey participants are registered users online, which means they can chat if they want during the service and are not anonymous. However, less than half of them chat during the service because they feel it is too distracting. This could mean by Lindlof's definition, that the traditional sense of community is lessened here since less than half of them are chatting, but the interview data will provide more in depth detail of this matter.

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they wanted to participate in other research for Central. If they were willing, they included their email address and were put into a database of potential candidates for the interview portion of this study.

Interview Data Analysis

This section of the paper reviews the selection process of the interviewees, as well as their demographics and a detailed review of the interview data as it relates to Lindlof's four common elements of an interpretive community – purposes, rules, rituals, and codes and two of his propositions – stability and overlapping.

Demographic Information & Interview Process

Once the potential candidates were identified, I went through the demographic information, attempting to choose a mixture of ages, race, genders, and religious identification. Then I selected 12 candidates and emailed each of them to ask them if they would be willing to come to the church for a 30-45 minute interview. Some did not respond to the email, so a second email was sent to them a few weeks later. If they did not respond to the second email, I attempted to call them. If they were unreachable or did not return my phone call, I chose another candidate with similar demographic information. Of the final 12 participants, 6 were male and 6 were female. Their age ranges were from 26-60

and 8 of them were married, 2 were divorced, 1 was separated, and 1 was single. 10 identified themselves as non-denominational Christian, 1 as Protestant Christian, and 1 as Roman Catholic. 8 were white, 2 were Asian-Pacific Islander, 1 was Hispanic, and 1 was Spanish/Italian. Although I attempted to find interviewees of different sexes, ages, marital status, religions, and races, this proved somewhat difficult because it was also based on the availability and willingness of the participants. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed by a professional transcriber. After I received the transcriptions back, I went through each interview and highlighted the comments that either seemed relevant to this study or were repeated in other interviews. Next I created an Excel document with common themes running along the top and the interviewee names along the side and then I marked an “x” in each category the interviewee mentioned. Often there was more than one “x” in each category, if the interviewee repeated the theme in the interview. I also gave the transcriptions to two outside people to see if they were identifying the same themes in the interviews. All the words in the interviews after transcription added up to 31,902. This is the data that will be analyzed in the next section.

Community Elements

Again, the research questions revolved around some of Lindlof’s common elements of a community. First, community is based on a unity of shared circumstances, customs, interests, and purposes. Second, a community has moral obligations that the members share, such as rules, codes, and etiquette. Third, a community must have some sort of stability over time, which can be aided by establishments of sacred icons, rituals, myths, and canonical texts. And fourth, community furnishes the communicative occasions and

codes that create social actors to coordinate their actions and to recognize who is inside or outside their membership.

Overall Impressions of the Community

To get the interviewees comfortable talking and in the environment, I asked them some general questions about Central as a community. Their experience at Central was mostly positive. Some had only been coming to Central for 6 months, while others have been there for many years. Interestingly, 7 out of the 12 interviews said they grew up in a Catholic church and consider themselves “Ex-Catholics” now. The majority of them said they believe Central’s non-traditional, relevant type of service drew them away from the Catholic church. A number of them also said that even though Central is a large church, it feels small because they know others well. Every interviewee said that Central was a community. In describing the community, many noted that there is a very informal dress code at Central – you can wear whatever you want or do not have to dress up for church and they like that. Also, Central is a very welcoming, non-judgmental, and accepting of anyone community. For example, Robert said,

It was quite a change from the traditional church I’m used to and it had been a long time since I’d been to church. It was a very welcoming change. It was nice to be accepted for me and being felt like I was accepted, not judged because I showed up in jeans and a t-shirt or I hadn’t shaven that week. I had just gotten off the plane and was going through a divorce so it was nice to feel welcome.

In describing the community at Central, many repeated a common phrase heard around the church, which is, “it’s okay to not be okay.” This phrase exemplifies the descriptions of the church by the interviewees. Another statement that they often said was that Central was a “come as you are” church. These statements mean that people do not have to have their life together before they come to church. They can walk in the door as is

– with any problems, struggles, or even addictions they may have and they will be welcomed and accepted. They can even find help for anything they may need help with. The “come as you are” mentality for the physical church is interesting as it relates to the online community because essentially the virtual community is already “come as you are.”

These questions helped people start to open up about their experiences at Central and be comfortable talking.

Purpose of Community

In looking at Lindlof’s common elements of the community, the first one that was asked about was purpose. According to Lindlof, community is based on a unity of shared purposes. Interviews agreed in the purposes of the Central communities, but the physical and online communities had different purposes. For example, the majority of interviewees said the purpose of the physical church community is to help others (and themselves) to know about God. A few also mentioned to help disadvantaged people in our community. Sally said, “I think it’s about getting people who are lost or haven’t had a relationship with God just to introduce a lot of people to Him.” And Robert said, “I think the community, the purpose of this church, is to draw people that would not normally go to churches, and have them learn about God.”

That was the answer for the physical church, however when it came to the Online Campus, many said the purpose of that was to help people who could not leave their house or were in another city/state/country attend church. For example, Mary said, “I think it reaches a lot of people that are more homebound and they have a hard time getting transportation.” And John said “...for people who can’t come to service. For people who just either left town or out of town, just can’t do the services or people who lived in Vegas

before and moved to a different state and still miss seeing the service.” The online community is a secondary or substitute community for many. If they cannot make it to the physical campus one weekend, perhaps they are out of town or the kids are sick, then they can attend online.

Therefore, according to the interviewees, the physical and online churches have different purposes.

Another question that came under purpose was why they attend each location. When it came to why they attend the physical location of Central, there were various answers, but patterns still emerged. One main reason was because of the pastor. They like the Senior Pastor Jud Wilhite and feel like when he teaches, he is speaking to them. Every participant said they enjoyed Jud’s messages and many mentioned it several times in their interview.

“I really like listening to Jud because he doesn’t preach down to you and he is a real person.”

“I love Jud. He’s a great pastor, a great preacher.”

“Whenever Jud talks about the Bible in service, a lot of his messages really speak to me. There’s a connection with whatever he says.”

Other reasons included liking the casual atmosphere, the worship music, and the creative videos. But as to why they attend the Online Campus, most were reasons of convenience such as they are on vacation and not in town, car troubles, kids are sick, busy work schedules, etc. When asked why he attends, Michael said, “Because if we can’t physically get here because of kids being sick or whatever else is happening, we can still attend church. I think it’s there for people that won’t physically go to church for whatever reason. I am just happy to be able to ride on the coattails of that. I don’t think it’s there for people like me.” If the reason for attending the physical church is to learn about God

through teaching and the reason for going to the online church is simply a matter of convenience, then the importance of the physical community seems to be elevated above the online community. And if the physical community is more important, then perhaps the online community is less valued or less stable as Lindlof suggests.

Finally, not only is the purpose for the two different churches different, so are the reasons for attending them.

Lindlof also believes interpretive communities can overlap with other communities. The two communities of Central, the physical and online ones, definitely overlap. People have different reasons for attending both and they see similar things at both. Many interviewees said they go to both on the same weekend, to catch something they may have missed the first time or just to hear it again. Or for Ellen, it is because she was too busy volunteering. She said,

I am a part of the Online Campus now because there are some weekends where I'm here for four or five services, serving in Family Ministries and I don't get a chance to go to the physical service here while I'm on campus, so I like the luxury of having the Online Campus. I can go home that evening or Tuesday night or Thursday night and be able to still be a part of that service.

The overlap provides people with more opportunities to worship God and hear the weekend's message. It also gives them more chances to meet others in the community, but in a different way. Or in other words, it gives people more options and makes church community a little more flexible for them. While they realize the online community is really for people who cannot attend a physical church, they still enjoy the benefits of being able to go online.

Rules of Community

The next common element Lindlof suggests that was studied here were the rules of the community. According to him, a community should share a set of common moral obligations, such as rules. This is an interesting element to look at for the Central community because the very essence and attraction of the community is that there really are no rules, but that is precisely what attendees like and it binds them together. In other words, it is a very inclusive community. For example, most traditional churches have a specific dress code, such as suits for men and dresses for women. The dress code at Central is “wear some clothes” and it is not uncommon to see the range of dress at Central on any given weekend vary from suits and dresses to flip-flops and t-shirts, the latter of which is more commonly used. In fact, the Senior Pastor, service Hosts, and Worship Team on stage at Central are almost always wearing just jeans and a nice shirt or t-shirt. When asked if Central had any rules, Charlie said,

Not necessarily rules; I think just respect that you don't talk to other people and you might make a comment like 'I really like that music' or 'I like that song' or 'that's a good point' or something like that, but it's nice to be able to come very informally and I think that's indicative of Las Vegas as a whole of the churches that I've attended. When I've attended churches in Ohio and Louisiana, you would dress up for church and not that you had to be in a suit and tie, but very rarely did you see people in flip-flops and t-shirts and shorts like you do here.

Many interviewees said that no rules really reinforces Central's mission to help bring in people new to the faith or those just searching for the truth. In other words, the casual atmosphere helps new guests feel comfortable. Most also agreed that this is the same for the Online Campus. When asked if Central had any rules, Sally said, “I don't think so...with Central, it's like you're more free, I guess. But, of course, they remind us of whatever it says in the Bible, not of some rule they make up.”

Not one person mentioned any rules people do not follow, either at the physical or Online Campus. The key insight from this is that while there may not be a set of rules strictly followed, most people stick to a self-enforced, general respect for others. For example, on the Online Campus chats, there is no swearing or negative comments made about the service. Chat discussions are positive and if people comment about being in a difficult situation, then others try to encourage them with kind words and offer of prayer. Examples of self-enforced rules emerged in the interviews for the online church. Maggie said, “I don’t like being talked to during the worship or during the singing. I tell my husband ‘if you’ve got something to say, tell me later.’” Michael said his whole family gathers on their bed and watch the service online. “My kids have to stay awake. We all get together on our bed and the kids hate waking up early - with the two younger ones, we are always waking them up.” Therefore, while it may not be a set of strict, public rules, there is a general respect for others and self-enforced rules.

One important thing to consider under rules is that while the interviewees may not think there are any, there is a good chance that they exist. They may be subtle or unspoken, but rules exist, as they do in every social setting.

Rituals of Community

Rituals are another common element of a community Lindlof points out. Establishments of rituals can help communities become more stable over time. While most interviewees felt both communities did not have any rituals, there were certain things each community did every week. For example, Michael said, “We are more non-traditional and not a bunch of ritual.” And Christy said,

...there is no altar here and there’s an altar at the Catholic church. There has been communion here, but over there, there’s communion every Sunday. Confession,

there's no confession, which I don't believe in really. The baptism...they baptize us when we're babies. There is a lot of difference. I remember, not it's different, but you couldn't wear pants to church and here you can come as you want. I like that. It's more comfortable here. They say that the music is loud, with all the screaming, but I love it.

However, almost every interviewee could repeat the weekly service order, which is usually three worship songs, announcements, a creative video about that week's topic, a special song, and then Jud's message. For example, Charlie said, "Obviously they've got a routine that I could pretty much tell you, you'll play your 3 or 4 songs, there's a break, you greet everybody, there's a video or some type of precursor to what Jud or whoever is going to be talking about, and then that goes on from there." Over half of the interviewees mentioned the verse the service always ends with, which is Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" None of the weekly service rituals made any of the interviewees feel uncomfortable and most said the Online Campus has the same rituals with the exception of the online chat and live prayer options. Most noticed the slight difference in the service between the physical and online. For example, the Online Campus Pastor has different host announcements (ones that pertain to their campus specifically). So while Central may not have rituals in the traditional sense, they do have elements in the weekly service that are consistent and these do not vary from the physical to online church.

Rituals in the communities can be found outside of the service as well. Stan said when he comes to the physical church, he parks in the same spot, goes through the same door, greets the same people, and sits in the same area every week. And for the online church, he and his family sit on the same bed every week, watch the service together as family, and nobody, even the kids are allowed to talk or fall asleep. Likewise, Michael said, "My wife and I sit at the kitchen table each week with the laptop and watch the

service online. The kids do not have to sit with us since they are so young, but they know to not interrupt us.” So while the interviewees may not consider these rituals in the traditional sense, they are definitely doing the same things for the service week to week.

Lindlof states that things like rituals can ground a community or could be indicators for how stable the community is. To get at this, I asked, how has Central changed over time? Almost everyone said that the church is growing. Regardless of how long they had been coming to Central, they could see the expansion of the church, especially with regards to additional campuses. This is the only change people noticed for both the physical and online communities.

I also asked how well they feel like they know others in the community. This question had many varying answers. In regards to the physical church, some said not at all because they preferred it that way and did not want to get involved in Small Groups or volunteering. For example, Maggie said, “For maybe the first month or two that we came, we didn’t even talk to anybody. We just wanted to sit in church and do nothing. We were involved with a small group and all of that in our old church, and we’re just kind of tired.” Also, Michael said, “I feel like my hands are full just keeping my kids focused on God, all of us praying together every night. For instance, to go to a Small Group would probably burst our balloon. I’m scared to death it would reach a point where we were like ‘oh, we can’t do this’ and then didn’t attend church.” In other words, Michael felt like he and his family were too busy for community. Others said they knew a small group of people very well. Mary said, “I’ve developed friendships with people that I see all the time and they know my name. I’ve gotten together outside of the church with people. I’m involved in a

Small Group, so I've made a lot of friends through the small groups. I'm also in the choir, as well."

In regards to the online community, most people did not know others on there very well. Sally said, "Online, it's hard because you don't see their faces. You're in a chat room and all that's said is 'good morning' and there's nothing else to interact with someone." But there were some who not only knew others on the online community, but also got together physically after meeting online. Charlie said, "One of the women that I've come to know through the online community has a Small Group and she is very enamored with that group, that's her support. I met her online and then we later met for coffee here in Henderson." Later on in the interview, Charlie also said, "Really the only ones that I've gotten to know are the people in the online community where I've met people, we've chatted online and that's how I've gotten to meet several people that way."

One thing that helps the community online, Robert said is being anonymous. He said, "...you're a little bit more anonymous online and I think people feel a little bit more comfortable sharing some things about their lives in that venue".

It seems as though for both the physical and online communities, the level of how well you know others in the community depends on your own personal level of commitment. You can either remain anonymous or get to know others in either community.

Also, similar to rules, there are many unspoken or subtle rituals that people do not even realize. Religion especially is full of ritual. Just coming to church every week is a ritual. So again, although the interviewees did not identify specific rituals, it does mean they do not exist.

Codes of Community

Lindlof believes interpretive communities furnish the communicative occasions and codes that create social actors to coordinate their actions and to recognize who is inside or outside their membership. The main code of this community is that it is welcoming to outsiders and informal in dress, style of service and speaking, and rules.

Because Central welcomes everyone to their community, none of the interviews mentioned any terms or phrases that the Central community, either physical or online, uses that outsiders would not know. For example, John said,

I think that everything that's done is very conducive to outsiders. It doesn't matter if you're Catholic, Protestant, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, whatever the case may be. We're opening up our arms, we're opening up our hearts to everyone.

A few terms were mentioned that are more Biblical words people might not know, like Holy Spirit, tithing, or communion. One person mentioned that church online in and of itself may be strange for new people, but almost every interviewee said they encouraged others to try the online church.

One question that was asked under this section was, how does Central differ from more traditional churches? For the physical church, there were two main answers to this question. First, the church is more accepting and welcoming to anyone who wants to come, no matter what they have done or where they have been their life. And second, the service itself is not ritualistic or full of traditions – it is very contemporary. But for the online church, people said Central is on the forefront of technology and social media. Almost every interview, and some more than once in the interview, said they like how Central is a part of social media sites. Robert said, “I love the fact that Central is online now and now that the church is also utilizing things like You Tube and Facebook, too, to get the message

out.” At the regional campuses of Central, attendees only see the teaching by the Senior Pastor on high-definition broadcast. Because the attendees at the main Henderson Campus almost always see Jud live, they prefer this method. But the regional campuses, who are used to seeing Jud on h-d, do not seem to mind. John said, “I don’t mind digi-Jud. He’s bigger than real Jud.” John also said he likes that his profile on the Online Campus can now be the same as on Facebook so they do not have to have separate profiles. Many of the interviewees said they have friends and family members who also watch the service online and that helps them grow closer together because even if they are not in the same location, they can go to church together. For example, John also said, “Another thing that has been really good for me is my family is in Colorado Springs, so I actually really enjoy the Online Campus because every now and then, it’s a chance for my dad and I to go to church together.” Therefore, the interviewees agreed that Central is a non-traditional church, but had different reasons as to why that is for the physical and online churches.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter gets back to the original research question, how do the physical and online communities of Central differ using Lindlof's definition of interpretive communities?; challenges Lindlof's definition of interpretive communities; and provides recommendations for future research.

First of all, according to the interviewees, they differ in purpose. Again, most said the purpose of the physical community is to help them and others know and learn about God, but for the online community, the participants said it was mostly there for people who could not leave their homes, for people out of the state and country, or even if they could not make it to church one weekend. In other words, the online community is there for reasons of convenience. Again, this suggests that the physical church has a higher purpose than the online church. Because the online community is simply there for a matter of convenience, it is a secondary community that is less important.

Without even realizing it, the interviewees seem to be elevating the purpose of the physical community over the online one – making the online community a secondary or substitute community. And they believe this affects the community. For example, Sally said, “I think it’s really good if you can come to a physical campus to be here because you really do have more intimate relationships with people and you get to know people. Especially by plugging into the Small Groups where online I think is a little more difficult.” This is the case for the majority of people, but not everyone. On the flip side of that there is a guy like John who only knows people through the Online Campus and even gets together with them outside of the service online and does not know anyone from

attending the physical church. In most cases, it comes down to intentionality. Do people want to experience a deeper, more intimate community? If so, they can find it at Central either through the physical or online communities.

Another implication of the online community being one of convenience is that it may be possible that people will eventually give up going to the physical campus and simply attend online. However, based on the majority of comments needing face-to-face community, it does not seem likely that this will happen.

Anonymity plays a role in Central's communities as well. For example, Lindlof (1998) says if members in online communities can come and go, if they are not required to chat or post comments, if they can remain anonymous, or if their identities are not verified, then the traditional sense of community can be severely weakened. But this is challenged by the above research, because like Robert said above, being anonymous online makes him feel more comfortable sharing something he would not others share face-to-face. Also, because Central's physical community is so large, people can come and go and be anonymous there too. Again, it boils down to the intentionality of the person and whether or not they want to remain anonymous. But just because some members want to remain anonymous, it does not seem to threaten the community.

People like John and comments like Robert's challenge previous notions about online communities and how deep relationships can go online. I think it would be worthwhile for Lindlof to revisit his definition of an interpretive community now that it has been more than 10 years since his research because online communities have advanced so much.

Although Central would not label itself a Protestant church, it is considered to be non-denominational, Christian church, which puts it in the Protestant church category. It is interesting to look at what conservative, Protestant churches would think of online church. The leader of the Episcopal church, Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori stated,

The reality is Christian communities; faith communities of all sorts need physical proximity of humane being in order to discover each other, in order to grow individually and as a community. We do not do that as well with people who are not in our presence. It is hard to build a faith community in a deep sense on the internet. We deal with caricatures; we deal with perceptions and positions rather than full human beings sitting in our presence (<http://religionmeetsnewmedia.blogspot.com/2009/01/can-online-community-be-incarnational.html>).

This leader believes face-to-face encounters are required for true community and specifically in faith communities. This research challenges that notion as there are examples of not only community online, but people experiencing community physically because they met online. For example, Charlie said that he met a guy on Central's Online Campus and they both said they enjoyed riding Harleys. So they met up for coffee and began a new friendship. I think it is possible that this leader and many others with the same beliefs are fearful that the online community will replace the physical community, which is obviously not happening.

Conservative, Protestant churches would consider Central to be more of a liberal or progressive Protestant church, although again, Central would not use these terms. It is likely that most of the churches with online campuses or communities are more of the progressive or liberal churches. Also, the data and discussion from this study is likely generalizable for these progressive or liberal churches.

Although Central's online and offline communities have similar rules, rituals, and codes that bind them together, it is not quite as structured as Lindlof suggests. For

example, Lindlof believes community codes can help establish who is inside or outside their membership. Central is an open, welcoming community that believes everyone belongs right away, without ever having to behave or believe a certain way. This could be a code in and of itself. As the interviews said the common phrase around Central, “it’s okay to not be okay.” In other words, there is no way of knowing whether someone is inside or outside the Central community unless you point blank ask them. Neither the online or physical community uses words or actions that outsiders would think are strange because they want everyone to feel welcome and comfortable. The same concept applies to rules as well. There really are none because Central does not want outsiders to feel bound by a bunch of man-made rules, but rather wants the community to be inclusionary of everyone and anyone. However, again, rules can be subtle or unspoken. Perhaps even Central’s beliefs, as noted on page 6, could be considered rules.

Another important theme to note is that all of these people are going to both the online and physical church and more specifically Central. The survey data backs this up. So the majority of people on the Online Campus are not new to Central and many are using it as a back-up plan, like if the kids are sick or they are out of town one particular weekend. In other words, they are supplementing their church experience and not replacing it. This is what Campbell’s research suggests as well. Many of them even realize that this is not the main purpose of the online community. The Online Campus does not bring in much as far as offering goes and this is probably because so many of the attendees are already going to a Central physical location and they are probably giving there and it also could be because it is still relatively new and it takes most churches some time to develop a positive offering pattern. If Central wants to increase the number of new people at the Online Campus, they

would need to be more intentional about inviting non-Centralers to the campus or using their physical church members to invite others outside of Las Vegas to attend. Since some of the interviewees said they invited friends and families to the Online Campus, perhaps some more initiative on Central's part will bring the people there even more. Marketing research for Central suggests that both for the online and physical church communities, the people are the best way to get the message out by inviting their friends and families.

Recommendations

One limitation to this research is that only one church was studied. Further research should include more online, church communities, although it did help the researcher that Central was accessible and studied in-depth. Another important study would be to interview people who only attend church online to see what their perceptions of community are like. Since they only attend online, they may not consider the community to be secondary. Focus groups and participant observation should also be considered as a method to data collection.

Again as a reminder, my involvement with the church I am studying is both a limitation to the study and a benefit. The church was very accessible to me, however it is possible that there was bias in the study from my personal involvement. I did try to remain as objective as possible. It would be interesting to see in future research if the results were the same for other religions online communities.

Churches and their members can use the data from this research practically by understanding the differences between offline and online communities before they decide to establish an online community. After reading this, perhaps they will re-consider creating an online community and decide a physical community is enough for them or they may

think about how they can overcome some of the difficulties present in an online community.

APPENDIX I

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Please know all your answers are anonymous and confidential. If any question makes you uncomfortable, feel free to skip it. Must be 18 years or older to participate.

How long have you been a part of Central's Online Campus?

-Since its launch in September of 2008

-6-9 months

-2-5 months

-1 month or less

How did you hear about Central's Online Campus?

-Friend

-Family member

-Internet search

-Social utility (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)

-Central Christian Church

-Other (please specify)

How many people do you usually watch the service with?

-Nobody else

-One person

-2-4 people

-5 or more people

What is the primary motivation for you to attend or participate in the service?

-The spiritual experience of the worship and teaching.

-The community aspect of being able to chat with other users or share the experience with family and friends.

-The convenience of not having to go to a physical church.

-I don't feel comfortable going to a physical church location.

-Other (please specify)

Do you feel like you're getting a real church experience through Central's Online Campus?

-Yes

-No

If yes...

Why do you feel like you're getting a real church experience? Check all that apply.

-I can meet and talk to fellow users/members.

-I can get spiritual guidance and/or prayer.

-I can learn through worship and teaching.

-I feel like I'm part of a community.

-Other (please specify)

If no...

Would you mind telling us why you don't feel like you're getting a real church experience? Check all that apply.

- I need to meet people face-to-face for a real church experience.
- I prefer to see the service live to feel this way.
- I need to go to a physical place for it to feel like a real experience.
- Other (please specify)

Do you participate in any other church services online?

- Yes
- No

If yes...

Since you participate in other church services online, what are the website names?

How frequently do you watch a service on Central's Online Campus?

- Every week
- 1-3 times a month
- Every other month
- Mostly on holidays
- 3-4 times a year
- Other (please specify)

Have you attended a service at any of Central's physical locations in Las Vegas?

- Yes
- No

If yes...

Which location have you attended?

- Henderson
- Summerlin
- Southwest

How often do/did you attend this physical location?

- Every week
- 1-3 times a month
- Every other month
- It varies
- Other (please specify)

If no...

Why don't you attend a Central physical location?

- I do not live in Las Vegas.
- I cannot go out of my home.
- I am not comfortable going to a physical church location.

- I belong to a different church community.
- Other (please specify)

Do you participate in the Online Campus as a guest or a registered user?

- Don't know
- Guest
- Registered User

If guest...

Why do you participate as a guest and not a registered user? Check all that apply.

- I don't feel it's necessary to talk with other users.
- I don't want to provide my personal information.
- It is just easier as a guest
- Other (please specify)

If registered user...

Do you usually participate in the chats during the services?

- Yes
- No

If no...

Could you tell us why you don't participate in the chats during service? Check all that apply.

- I feel it's distracting to the service.
- It's not necessary for me to get to know other members.
- I don't know how to chat with others.
- I didn't know I could chat with others.
- Other (please specify)

Do you attend a physical church location (Central or a different church)?

- Yes
- No

If yes...

Since you attend a physical church location, please select a sentence below that best describes you.

- I feel a part of the physical community, but not the online community.
- My experience is the same at both the physical church and the online church.
- I feel a part of the online community, but not the physical church community.
- I attend both for different reasons.
- I do not feel a part of either community.
- I am not seeking a community in either online or physical church.
- Other (please specify)

How can Central improve its Online Campus?

If there were other people watching the service from your area, would you consider meeting with them in a public place to watch it together?

-Yes

-No

Are you doing other things while watching the service?

-Yes

-No

If yes...

What other things do you do while watching or listening to the service?

How well do you feel you know the other users/members online?

-Very well

-Somewhat

-Not very well

-Not at all

-Other (please specify)

What do you think would help you get to know them more?

How do you usually listen to the service on Central's Online Campus?

-Computer speakers

-Headphones

-External speakers that I hook my computer up to

-Other (please specify)

If you would like to participate in other Central studies, please include your email address here.

The following questions are for demographic purposes only. They are optional, but appreciated.

Are you male or female?

-Male

-Female

What is your age?

-18-20

-21-25

-26-30

-31-35

-36-40

-41-45

-46-50

-51-55

- 56-60
- 61 or over

What is your current marital status?

- Single, never married
- Married
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed

What is your current religion affiliation?

- Protestant Christian
- Roman Catholic
- Evangelical Christian
- Non-denominational Christian
- Jewish
- Mormon
- Muslim
- Hindu
- Buddhist
- Other (please specify)

What is your race?

- White
- White, non-Hispanic
- African American
- Hispanic
- Asian-Pacific Islander
- Native American
- Other (please specify)

What state and country are you from?

Thanks for taking our survey!

APPENDIX II

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I. General questions – These questions are openers, to help get the participants talking and include, how long have you been at Central? What has your experience here been like? What's a service like? What are your dislikes or likes of Central?

II. Community questions – Is Central a community? If so, tell me about Central as a community?

In the next two sections (III, IV), I asked them to answer the questions as it relates to the face-to-face community. I went through the entire section of questions and then went back to the beginning and asked them to answer the questions as it relates to the online community.

III. Common element questions

A. Common element: Purposes – reasons for belonging to the community. Questions: Why are you a part of the Central community? What is the purpose of the community?

B. Common element: Rules – rules within the community. Questions: Are there any rules you follow at church? Examples might be certain types of dress, not speaking during the sermon, being nice to others on the chat discussion, etc. Are there any rules people do not follow? If so, what?

C. Common element: Rituals – repetitive actions. Questions: What are things the community does every week? Do any of the rituals make you feel uncomfortable?

D. Common element: Codes – a specific way of talking or acting. Questions: Are there any terms or phrases the Central community uses that people outside of Central would not know? Are there any actions or things you do at church that outsiders might think is strange? What makes Central different from traditional churches?

IV. Stability questions - One proposition of an interpretive community to Lindlof is stability – how grounded is the community. Questions: How does the community change over time? How well do you feel you know others in the community?

After the above two sections have been asked for both the face-to-face and online communities, I will move to the next section which applies to both at the same time.

V. Overlapping questions – Another proposition of communities is that they can overlap with other communities. Questions: Why do you participate in both the physical church community and the online one? Do you see the same things on the online church as you do the physical church? If so, what?

APPENDIX III



**Social/Behavioral IRB – Expedited Review
Approval Notice**

NOTICE TO ALL RESEARCHERS:

Please be aware that a protocol violation (e.g., failure to submit a modification for any change) of an IRB approved protocol may result in mandatory remedial education, additional audits, re-consenting subjects, researcher probation suspension of any research protocol at issue, suspension of additional existing research protocols, invalidation of all research conducted under the research protocol at issue, and further appropriate consequences as determined by the IRB and the Institutional Officer.

DATE: April 3, 2009
TO: Dr. Daniel Stout, Journalism and Media Studies
FROM: Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
RE: Notification of IRB Action by Dr. Paul Jones, Co-Chair *POIC*
Protocol Title: **Finding Community in Online Church: A Case Study of Central Christian Church**
Protocol #: 0901-2995

This memorandum is notification that the project referenced above has been reviewed by the UNLV Social/Behavioral Institutional Review Board (IRB) as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes 45 CFR 46. The protocol has been reviewed and approved.

The protocol is approved for a period of one year from the date of IRB approval. The expiration date of this protocol is April 1, 2010. Work on the project may begin as soon as you receive written notification from the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS).

PLEASE NOTE:

Attached to this approval notice is the **official Informed Consent/Assent (IC/IA) Form** for this study. The IC/IA contains an official approval stamp. Only copies of this official IC/IA form may be used when obtaining consent. Please keep the original for your records.

Should there be *any* change to the protocol, it will be necessary to submit a **Modification Form** through OPRS. No changes may be made to the existing protocol until modifications have been approved by the IRB.

Should the use of human subjects described in this protocol continue beyond April 1, 2010, it would be necessary to submit a **Continuing Review Request Form** 60 days before the expiration date.

If you have questions or require any assistance, please contact the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at OPRSHumanSubjects@unlv.edu or call 895-2794.

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
4505 Maryland Parkway • Box 451047 • Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-1047

RECEIVED

APR 02 2009



INFORMED CONSENT

Department of Journalism and Media Studies

TITLE OF STUDY: Finding Community In Online Church: A Case Study Of Central Christian Church

INVESTIGATOR(S): Dr. Daniel Stout and Kayla Gilmore

CONTACT PHONE NUMBER: 895-5957

Purpose of the Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore how computer-mediated communication (or virtual community) differs from face-to-face community in online church campuses and how that difference affects each respective community.

Participants

You are being asked to participate in the study because you participate in Central's online and physical church communities.

Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: Complete a short, multiple answer survey on-line and participate in a one-on-one personal interview.

Benefits of Participation

There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn the differences, if any, between online and physical church communities and what those differences mean to each community.

Risks of Participation

There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. You may be uncomfortable answering some of these questions.

Cost /Compensation

There will not be financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take 45 minutes of your time. You will not be compensated for your time.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Daniel Stout at 895-5957. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact **the UNLV Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 702-895-2794.**

Participant Initials _____

RECEIVED

APR 02 2009



TITLE OF STUDY: Finding Community In Online Church: A Case Study Of Central Christian Church

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the university or the church. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Confidentiality

All information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for three years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be shredded.

Participant Consent:

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

Participant Initials _____

RECEIVED

APR 02 2009



TITLE OF STUDY: Finding Community In Online Church: A Case Study Of Central Christian Church

I agree to be audio-taped during the interview purposes of this research study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Participant Name (Please Print)

Participant Note: Please do not sign this document if the Approval Stamp is missing or is expired.

Participant Initials _____



Central Christian Church ADDRESS: 1001 New Beginnings Drive, Henderson, NV 89011 TEL: 702.735.4004 FAX: 702.735.4082 WEB: centralchristian.com

Letter of Authorization to Conduct Research at Facility

Brenda Durosinmi, MPA, CIP, CIM -Director
Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
University of Nevada Las Vegas
4505 Maryland Parkway, Box 451047
Las Vegas, NV 89154-1047

Subject: Letter of Authorization to Conduct Research at Central Christian Church

Dear Ms. Durosinmi:

This letter will serve as authorization for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas ("UNLV") researcher/research team, Dr. Daniel Stout and Kayla Gilmore to conduct the research project entitled "Finding community in online church: A case study of Central Christian Church" at Central Christian Church in Henderson, Nevada ("Facility").

The Facility acknowledges that it has reviewed the protocol presented by the researcher, as well as the associated risks to the Facility. The Facility agrees to allowing UNLV to conduct an online survey and interview at the Facility. The Facility accepts the protocol and the associated risks to the Facility, and authorizes the research project to proceed. The research project may be implemented at the Facility upon approval from the UNLV Institutional Review Board.

If we have any concerns or require additional information, we will contact the researcher and/or the UNLV Office for the Protection of Research Subjects.

Sincerely,

[Handwritten signature]
Facility's Authorized Signatory

3/18/09
Date

Kurt Ervin, Regional Executive Pastor
Name and Title of Authorized Signatory

REFERENCES

- Bainbridge, W.S. (2007a). Electronic game research methodologies: Studying religious implications. *The Review of Religious Research*, 49(1), 35-53.
- Bainbridge, W. S. (2007b). Expanding the use of the Internet in religious research. *The Review of Religious Research*, 49(1), 7-20.
- Berger, P.L. (1967). *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*. Doubleday, Garden City, NY.
- Brasher, B.E. (2001). *Give me that online religion*. Jossey-Bass Inc., San Francisco, CA.
- Campbell, H. (2004). Making space for religion in Internet studies. *The Information Society*, 21, 309-315.
- Campbell, H. (2005). *Exploring religious community online: We are one in the network*. New York, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Central Christian Church. Retrieved August 9, 2008, from centralchristian.com
- Central Christian Church. Retrieved September 10, 2008 from centralonlinecampus.com
- Clarke, J. (2007). Communing on the Internet: Chinese Catholics and their various uses of the web. *Asian Studies Review*, 31 (4), 459-470.
- Clough, D. (2002). *Unweaving the web: Beginning to think theologically about the internet*. Cambridge: Grove Books, Ltd.
- Cogell, W.G. (2001). *Cultural Christianity: The Puritan Heritage*. International Congregational Journal, 2, 38-56.
- Cornwall, M., Albrecht, S.L., Cunningham, P.H., Pitcher, B.L. (1986). The dimensions of religiosity: A conceptual model with an empirical test. *Review of Religious Research*, 27(3), 226-245.
- Dixon, P. (1997). *Cyberchurch: Christianity and the Internet*. Eastborne: Kingsway Publications.
- Fernback, J. (2002). *Internet ritual: A case study of the construction of computer-mediated neopagan religious meaning*. *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*. S.M. Hoover and L.S. Clark, Eds. Columbia University Press, New York.

- Hoover, S., Clark, L.S., Rainie, L. (2004). *Faith online*. Retrieved June 11, 2008, from pewinternet.org
- Hunter, J.D., Ainley, S.C. (1986). *Making sense of modern times. Peter L. Berger and the vision of interpretive society*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
- Hutchings, T. (2007). Creating church online: A case-study approach to religious experience. *Studies in World Christianity*, 13 (3), 243-260.
- Lawrence, B. (2002). "Allah on-line: The practice of global Islam in the information age." *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*. S.M. Hoover and L.S. Clark, Eds. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Leadership Network. (2007). *Churches with an internet campus*. Retrieved July 1, 2008, from <http://digital.leadnet.org/2007/10/index.html>
- Lindlof, T.R. (2002). Interpretive community: An approach to media and religion. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 1(1), 61-74.
- Lindlof, T.R., Shatzer, M.J. (1998). Media ethnography in virtual space: Strategies, limits, and possibilities. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 42(2), 170-190.
- Lochhead, D. (1997). *Shifting realities: Information technology and the church*. Geneva: WCC.
- Minger, P. (2007). Streaming media open roads for churches. *Church Solutions*, 13 (6), 30.
- Nash, D. (2002). *Religious sensibilities in the age of the Internet: Freethought culture and the historical context of communication media*. *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*. S.M. Hoover and L.S. Clark, Eds. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Ramo, J.C. (1996). Finding God on the web. *Time*, 148 (27), 60-67.
- Stout, D. A. (2004). Secularization and the religious audience: A study of Mormons and Las Vegas media. *Mass Communication & Society*, 7(1), 61-75.
- Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research*, 23, 3-43.
- When Religion Meets New Media. Retrieved November 1, 2009, from <http://religionmeetsnewmedia.blogspot.com/2009/01/can-online-communtiy-be-incarnational.html>

VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Kayla Gilmore

Degrees: Bachelor of Arts, English, 2001
University of Nebraska, Lincoln

Thesis Title: A Church Without Walls: Finding Community in Central Christian Church's
Online Campus

Thesis Examination Committee:

Chairperson, Daniel A. Stout, Ph.D.

Committee Member, Gary W. Larson, Ph.D.

Committee Member, Stephen Bates, J.D.

Graduate Faculty Representative, Ted Jelen, Ph.D.