Research Summaries and Lessons on Doing Religion and Church Online

WORKING PAPER

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The following is a synopsis of ten research articles written by Professor Heidi A Campbell over the past two decades addressing important Issues of how religious communities use the internet, and the ways churches are impacted by their use and experimentation. A summary is provided of each article, along with two to four quotes from each article that highlight key research findings. Article quotes are presented as "lessons" that each of these research studies can offer religious organizations and community leaders who are considering or trying to implement digitally mediated forms of worship. This overview also spotlights important social, ethical and theological implications of doing church online that can impact religious organizations.

Campbell, H.A. (forthcoming 2020). Studying Digital Ecclesiology: How Churches are Being Informed by Digital Media and Cultures, *Ecclesial Practices.*

This article provides an introduction to a special issue of the journal *Ecclesial Practices* on Studying Digital Ecclesiology. Digital ecclesiology is a phrase used to describe the strategies used by churches for integrating digital media and the practical and theological motivations behind those choices. I argue that church leaders need to not only be skilled in using and implementing digital technology strategies but take time to unmask the cultural and theological conceptions that lie behind different definitions of church and their embedded assumptions about technology.

Lessons from Digital Ecclesiology:

Using technology means embracing a loss of control

While new technologies offer churches certain advantages such as streamlining communication practices and providing members easier access to church information and teachings. Yet these advantages must be weighed against the potential for social media to make private church conversations public. This potentially exposes church structures and leadership to public scrutiny and accountability in new ways.

Churches need to develop digital literacy and theological reflection on technology

Church leadership need to cultivate digital literacies that do not simply focus on the pragmatic use of technology, but literacies that unpack the theological ethos and values of different technologies and their implementation in church environments. These digital literacies also require churches and church leaders to understand how to construct digital resources and presences online that match and echo their core vision and mission. This requires creating a flow and connection between a church's online-digital and offline-embodied identities.

Campbell, H.A., Sheldon, Z., Gibson, J., & Guzman, G. (forthcoming 2020). Technological Mediation of Identity in American Multi-Site Churches, *Ecclesial Practices.*

This article explores how churches present their religious identity online through the digital and multimedia resources they produce to showcase their ministries. In this study we focus on the digital performances of religious identity of multisite churches, which are churches that meet in multiple locations. We argue technology plays a key role not only in facilitating their church services, but in shaping members' and visitors' understanding of what church is within these contexts. This investigation leads us to a close study of digital media use of these churches, in order to uncover what factors such churches need to consider about their use of digital media if they are to ensure they are communicating cohesive and consistent identities in both the online and offline aspects of their church.

Lessons from Technological Mediation:

Churches use technology because of opportunities it offers, but tech use also shapes churches' identity
Most churches' media usage is largely utilitarian; it is used because it is seen to allow the church to reach a broader audience, communicate information, and interact with visitors and members. While such utilitarianism ultimately seems to trump the work of identity formation these churches seem to be using media for, the fact that identity work *is* happening through media usage cannot be ignored.

Online expressions of church should be connected to and mirror offline expressions of church
Multi-site churches primarily use digital media to broadcast their service to multiple locations. This shows how one offline site is connected to many others by bringing the message and the church online. Facilitating community in this way demonstrates how these churches see offline and online spaces as interconnected, if only because they are using them in this way.

There needs to be consistency between digital and offline presentations and articulations of church identity
Church leaders must have a well-defined idea of how the church wants to be *perceived*. A strong grasp of this can help leaders avoid discrepancies between online and offline identity that might be off-putting to members and newcomers alike. This requires a clear articulation of how the church's identity relates to its mission and the outlets through which the church and its members live this mission and identity and communicate them to others.

Church media use informs how its mission is understood both internally and externally
Media technology within a church has an important, and often unrecognized, impact on community members. It shapes their views of media and the perceived relationship between religion and media culture. So, the communication techniques a church uses will have an effect not only on the church's identity as perceived by the public, it also influences members' view of what constitutes church in contemporary society.

Campbell, H.A. & Evolvi, G. (2019). Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies, *Journal of Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*. 1(3): 1–13. URL: https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.149

This article provides an overview of contemporary research within the interdisciplinary arc of scholarship known as digital religion studies, in which scholars explore the intersection between emerging digital technologies, lived and material religious practices in contemporary culture, and the impact the structures of the network society have on understandings of spirituality and religiosity. Digital religion studies specifically investigates how online and offline religious spaces and practices have become bridged, blended, and blurred as religious groups and practitioners seek to integrate their religious lives with technology use within different aspects of digital culture.

Lessons from Current Digital Religion Research:

Digital media can be used by people to articulate and work out their religious identities and visions
Scholarship on digital religion suggests that people may employ digital media to gain agency to narratively and esthetically articulate their identities and subvert existing identity representations. This articulation may happen collectively through interpersonal interactions and also foster the formation of religious communities

Religious community is possible online, but is different than traditional ideas of community
In exploring online religious communities, scholars consider how the Internet modifies notions of friendship and relationship and how communities become intrinsically connected to networked practices The Internet allows people to contact each other, but scholars often question the extent to which this can actually constitute a community where members share common values. While online communities can grant enhanced freedom from geographical and social boundaries. The successful functioning of an online community depends also on the characteristics of the media platform where it exists. Websites that allow users to post messages

Digital media influences how religious authority is understood and lived out
The impact of digital media on these different levels of authority may both challenge and affirm traditional authority. Some studies have suggested that while the Internet offers the possibility of subverting authority structures, religious groups tend to reproduce online the same hierarchies that exist offline. Other studies focused on the changes that digital religion provokes in authority structures, point to the changing relationships that characterize the Internet age which urge religious leaders to learn the logic of digital media.

Campbell, H. & Virtullo, A. (2016) "Accessing Changes in the Study of Religious Communities in Digital Religion Studies" *Church, Communication & Culture*. 1(1):73-89.

This article provides a focused review of researches undertaken within Digital religion studies in the last three decades, specifically highlighting how religious communities have been studied and approached within this area. It highlights the dominant theoretical and methodological approaches employed by scholars during what is being described as the four stages of research on religious communities emerging

over this period of time. Thus, this article presents the findings of key studies emerging during these stages to illuminate how the study of religious communities online has evolved over time. It also offers insights into how this evolution specifically relates to the study of Catholic community online. Finally, a theoretical analysis is given, assessing current research on religious communities within Digital Religion studies, and approaches for future research are proposed.

Lessons from Studying Religious Communities:

People view participation in religious groups as part of their overall social lives
The analysis of online and offline context studies revealed the fact that Internet users consider these two 'realities' part of their whole social life, but there is no settled notion of how offline religious groups interact online. Surveys of religious Facebook users have found the social media platform provided users with a unique online venue for supporting their offline religious organizations and communities.

Because the Internet is a part of people's daily lives, religious groups must consider how this impact their members
The Internet serves as an integral sphere of everyday life. It is embedded to some degree in many people's existence and daily routines. Researchers must move toward a nuanced consideration of how these technologies and spaces have also become embedded in religious culture.

The Internet can connect online and offline religious activities and experiences
The Internet is not a completely separate space; it is integrated by its proximity in many religious behaviors and rituals. As part of everyday social life, it is also a central part of religious

existence…Current work often emphasizes the integration of online and offline spheres and practices and aims to explore more deeply the relationship between online and offline religious community and how members perceive and integrate their religiosity between these contexts. Researchers recognize the fact that the Internet is embedded in the everyday, with online activities integrating offline issues and interests.

An online religious presence and involvement can solidify members' investment in their offline faith community
Online allows offline groups to extend their interactions and investments in their members and structures, flow between two contexts, and allows for experimentation in communication and relations that can strengthen or challenge either context. For example, Campbell's and Delashmutt's (2013) study of multi-site churches' use of technology demonstrated how online services and groups help members consolidate and affirm their feelings of belonging.

Campbell, H. & Delashmutt, M. (2014). Studying technology & ecclesiology in online multi-site worship. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. **29 (2): 267-285.**

This study brings together research approaches from media studies and practical theology in order to study and understand the relationship between online technological features of multi-site worship and the larger offline worshipping community to which it is connected. From the perspective of media studies we reflect on how new media technologies and cultures are allowed to shape online worship spaces and how larger institutional traditions and structures are allowed to shape technologically mediated church events. From the perspective of practical theology we use

the notion of inculturation as a lens for a better understanding of the specific ways in which Christian worship practices adapt, change, and respond to the new cultural setting which emerges from the online worship context. Together, these approaches illuminate the interplay between digital technology and ecclesiological tradition in shaping multi-site church worship practices.

Lessons from Studying Technology & Ecclesiology:

The Internet provides a space and opportunity for people to work out and act out their religious identity online
Research on online churches and Christian communities have highlighted common themes in the way practices in such groups may (a) inform members' definitions of church, as online churches offer what is seen as similar services and support, (b) lead to new notions of church affiliation, linked to global rather than local identities or (c) cultivate unique cultures that provide impetus for crafting new communal or contextual theologies. Attention has also been given to the ways offline contexts inform group worship experiences and perceptions in virtual environments

People actually shape technology so it aligns with their religious and moral values
Scholars who study religious practice online have paid attention to the extent to which religious actors shape and re-negotiate technological platforms for their purposes as well as the types of social and technological patterns that may develop from a religious group's culturing of technology. This approach is known as the religious-social shaping of technology; it examines how history, tradition, and core religious values shape negotiation strategies of religious communities

Religious people seek connection and coherence between their online and offline religious practices
Scholars are also paying increasing attention to the intersection of online and offline religious communities. Studies have found that individuals often seek coherence between their online and offline religious activities and identities by conceptually and practically connecting them through their practices. Thus, it becomes important for religious institutions to organize their activities so that they present a cohesive and clear identity for members as they engage with both online and offline counterparts

Religious worship online requires negotiation between traditional religious symbols and rituals and new understandings of spirituality facilitated by digital technology
A challenge occurs when symbols, actions, and words used in Christian worship are taken from traditions and texts which are no longer continuous with the world in which the modern worshipper is situated. Facilitating worship in a way which is meaningful to today's worshipper presents two choices: one may find and employ complementary signs which suitably represent the aging symbols or one may elect to translate the language and experience of worship into forms which are sensible within the common vernacular.

Campbell, H. (2012). Understanding the relationship between religious practice online and offline in a networked society. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion.* 80(1), 64-93.

This article suggests that religious practice online, rather than simply transforming religion, highlights shifts occurring within broader Western

culture. The concept of "networked religion" is introduced as a way to encapsulate how religion functions online and suggests that online religion exemplifies several key social and cultural changes in religion in general society. Networked religion is defined by five key traits—networked community, storied identities, shifting authority, convergent practice, and a multisite reality—that highlight central research topics and questions explored within the study of religion and the internet. Studying religion on the internet provides insights not only into the common attributes of religious practice online, but helps explain current trends within the practice of religion and even social interactions in networked society.

Lessons Understanding Religious Practice Online:

Religious practice and culture on the Internet functions like a social network
Networked religion is a useful way to describe religious practice and culture online in terms of a network approach where relationships, identities, and realities are shaped through loosely bounded affiliations established by individual user preferences and connection over traditionally tightly bounded relations established through hierarchies. It is represented by five traits.

Religious gathering and identity online are defined as being dynamic, fluid, highly personalized and allow individuals more flexibility than traditional religious contexts
Networked community suggests that communities function as loose social networks with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment. This transforms notions of membership in a fixed, geographically bound community to highlight the fact that people live simultaneously in multiple social networks that are emergent, varying in depth, fluid, and highly personalized. *Storied*

identity offers an understanding of the religious self that is malleable rather than fixed, yet unified through connecting to a select narrative. Individuals are able to assemble and perform their identity online in new ways through digital resources that are also used to connect this identity to a common group or experience to solidify meaning. This reflects changing perceptions of the nature of the self within wider society.

Online religious practice empower and encourage individualized user experiences driven by personal choice
Shifting authority notes that there is a shift occurring within traditional religious power structures through the institution of new gatekeepers and authority roles and structures online. This means that the authority within a networked structure creates challenges between new and old authorities, as offline leaders seek to solidify their position and control in the face of newly empowered sources, raising issues of legitimacy, authenticity, and status within the social sphere. *Convergent practice* outlines the blending of religious rituals and information from multiple sources in ways that build a self-directed form of spiritual engagement online. Here, networked interaction creates new possibilities for highly individualized and hybridized traditional-innovative forms of practice and modes of knowing.

Offline contexts, expectations, and behaviors offline influence online religious practice
Multisite reality suggests that the online world is consciously and unconsciously imprinted by users' offline values; so online ways of being are informed by patterns of life offline. This means that there is a strong interconnection and potential movement between online and offline

contexts, expectation, and behaviors. This ideological overlap guides individuals' network interactions. These five characteristics can be seen as markers describing the current social milieu surrounding much of Western religious culture. By observing how traditional beliefs and relationships are re-negotiated by individuals online, we see networked religion illustrate just one arena in which the trends of being in a networked society are impacting simply another facet of contemporary society. In some respects, certain characteristics.

Campbell, H. & Calderon, P. (2007). The question of Christian community online. *Studies in World Christianity*, **13(3), 261-277.**

As more and more Christian Internet users become involved in various chat, email and blogging groups, they are increasingly seeing and referring to these online social networks as religious communities. For many believers their Christian community involves both online and offline friendships and affiliations, a concept still problematic and contentious to many religious leaders. Thus the purpose of this paper investigates what constitutes a Christian community online and the possibilities and challenges which exist when Christians who gather for religious purpose online begin to conceive of their group as a Christian community. This is done by exploring a particular Christian online Bulletin Board, the Artist World Network, in order to understand how this group sees itself and functions as a community. This investigation provides a way to address the question of what constitutes an online Christian community. It also opens up discussion on the possibilities and challenges online religious communities pose for the offline Christian community.

Lessons from Christian Community Online:

The type of online community that is most desired is that which creates and encourages relationships where Internet users feel valued
Previous research by Campbell highlights the core traits of community most valued by online participants. First, the online religious community is characterized by *relationship*, or ability of the online group to provide space for and support personal relationships. Here people are focused on building and maintaining relationships toward a common purpose. Secondly, these groups exhibit *care* or ability to give and receive support, such as sharing prayer requests, and encouragement to one another. Thirdly, they *value* members and the group, encouraging members to contribute to the group and invest in communal conversations. Here value is placed both in the emotional investment the members make and in how public participation is encouraged and affirmed.

Just like offline, individuals online desire clear and honest communication; unlike offline community the Internet also allows for contact with one's community
Fourthly, there is an *intimate communication* within the group. They seek to create a safe place for transparency and encourage accountability. Fifthly, they exhibit strong connections for members and the group. Having a 24-hour a day accessibility to the community that transcends normal space-time limitations makes finding and connecting with other like minds easier. This connection can also create a desire to have face-to-face contact.

People in online communities seek out others of shared faith, rather than simply sources of information

Most of these characteristics could be applied to any form of online community. It is the final characteristic, *shared faith*, which distinguishes it. These communities share a common search for meaning and purpose in light of a distinct interpretation of life and reality. For many interactions online can be interpreted as worshipping God or part of one's faith journey. These characteristics provide a framework of how one might study the nature of the online Christian community as well as create a guideline for defining what might constitute a Christian community online.

Moving religion online does not mean an exodus from offline or traditional church
Online community claims have prompted religious leaders to fear a mass exodus of members from the pews of churches to the screens of isolated computer terminals where they 'do church' online. However, research on the correlation between online and offline involvement in communities and organizations has addressed these concerns with illuminating findings… Overall, research has demonstrated that involvement in religious organizations for now seems unaffected by internet usage, neither encouraging nor distracting from participation in religious groups. Their result addresses the concern that participation in online religious communities may detracts from community involvement, including religious participation.

Campbell, H. (2005). Considering spiritual dimensions within computer-mediated communication studies. *New Media and Society*, 7(1), 111-135.

This article explores how the internet is being studied and conceived of as a sacramental space. The internet as sacramental space demonstrates how religious users see the internet as a viable place for presenting their beliefs and practices. In order to understand this model, several other dominant conceptions of the internet are offered: information space, a common mental geography, an identity workshop and a social space. Each of these highlight a specific use of the internet. The internet as sacramental space is further investigated by considering several typologies of online spiritual communities emerging from a recent online community study. Each typology highlights how the internet as sacramental space encompasses traits of the previously stated models and illustrates how the internet is used as a spiritual tool, religious identity, a space for personal spiritual pursuits and a social spiritual support sphere.

Lessons from Spiritual Dimensions of CMC:

Many people with a spiritual outlook view the Internet as a sacred, religious space
Increasing numbers of people see the Internet as a potential sacred space and the Internet technology as possessing a spiritual quality. How individuals build online spiritual communities and their reasons for belonging to them are closely linked to their conceptions of Internet technology. As sacramental space the internet can be used to help form religious identity, as a space for personal spiritual pursuits, as a social spiritual support sphere and as a spiritual tool.

People see the Internet as providing opportunities for users to both experience and perform their religion in new ways
There are four common narratives that can describe the range of motivations behind how online religious communities are conceived and employ technology for a particular purpose or mission. *Online community as a religious identity* sees the Internet as an opportunity to engage in

building relationships from a similar religious tradition and promote a like-minded sense of belief. *Online community as a spiritual network* sees the Internet as part of spiritual manifest destiny to experience the Divine in ways that influence life online and offline.

For many, the Internet serves as a space to build spiritual relationships and practice or innovate their religious rituals
Online community as a support network sees the Internet as a safe place to build spiritually and emotionally supportive relationships. Online community worship spaces view the Internet as a space where ritual and communal expressions of worship can take place. Identifying with a particular narrative helps an online community promote internal order and maintain coherence. Each narrative also emphasizes a particular motivation for technological use, while highlighting a shared belief that the Internet can be set apart for sacred use.

Campbell, H. (2004). Challenges created by online religious networks. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 3(2), 81-99.

This article considers the challenges that online religious communities raise for religious culture. A survey of cultural changes in media, community, and religion uncovers similar structural shifts, from hierarchical structures to more open, dynamic relationship patterns in society. Examining this shift helps explain why cyber-religion and online religious communities have become an emergent phenomenon. Emphasis is placed on the argument that the Internet has thrived because it has surfaced in a cultural landscape that promotes fluid yet controlled relationships over tightly bound hierarchies. Religious online communities are expressions of

these changes and challenge traditional religious definitions of community. Especially problematic is the image of community as a network of relations. This article also addresses common concerns and fears of religious critics, related to online communities through an analysis of current literature on these issues, along with a synthesis of research studies relating to the social use and consequences of the Internet.

Lessons from Challenges in Religious Networks:

Online religious community acts as a network in contemporary society
Amidst the tension that online communication and community creates, one fact remains: People increasingly are forming relationships both online and offline, which function in a network format. These relational networks differ from traditional views of community. The challenge this creates does not negate the fact that this trend exists within the current cultural landscape, though arguably more so in the West than in other cultures. Yet the terminology of a "network" does however serve as a useful descriptor of the form and function of many group relationships existing within contemporary society.

Understanding community as a social network compliments a number of key religious metaphors and theological models found in the Christian tradition
Discussing community as a network for religion, especially Christian, community is problematic. Many religious leaders view technology in terms of Resistance and caution in how media and technology can influence religious individuals and communities…Yet, the network metaphor and social network analysis do not stand in complete contradiction to religious understanding of community. Religious images, definitions, and models of community can be utilized within a

network understanding of community. Work on community as Trinity, mystical communion, and the people of God demonstrate images of relationships that are flexible and adaptable, while maintaining bonds of commitment through dynamic interaction with one another and the Divine.

Approaching religious communities as networked creates a unique opportunity for religious users to evaluate traditional understandings of community, which no longer reflect the way people actually live
The network understanding of relations and religious online communities need not be a stumbling block for discourse on the trends within mainstream or religious culture. In many ways, the network metaphor provides a more accurate description of contemporary patterns of relationships. Perhaps it is in networked religion that we will rediscover what it means to be the people of God and the church.

Campbell, H. (2003). Congregation of the disembodied. In M. Wolf (Ed.), *Virtual morality* **(pp. 179-199). London: Peter Lang Publishing.**

This article investigates online church communities as members of the "invisible church" and how they function, what they are shaped by, and the ways they are linked to the real-world church. It explores how the Internet, or cyberspace, was created for making connections, how online, what we communicate is in a sense, our "bodies," since electronic communication is blind, and even how our words online can cause offline hurt. Additionally, the article discusses how an online user can create his/her own identity, or identities. The article includes a case study of an online community of people who feel they have a God-given prophecy gift, called "Community of Prophecy." The group

provided an online course that included a training program and an activation program, which included allowing users to practice their gift online. The article discusses how within this group there is a transference from a spiritual place to an online place, how each individual uses texts to communicate elements of themselves with greater freedom than in the real world, and finally, how often we conjure others' identities through the connections we make since there is only a screen to gather information from.

Lessons from Congregation of the Disembodied:

Online words are important, since they are used to define and represent people's identities
The way communication is made online is through understanding and connecting with another online identity. Identities are formed through words, since online, there are no bodies. This means people "…interpret the textual identity of a person" (Campbell 182). It is essential that words are chosen carefully since they are critical in forming an online identity.

Online hurt or abuse can impact people, in the same way offline offenses do
Online communication can be deceptively easy to forget that there is a person behind the online facade and create a "dissolution of boundaries" and "removal of social constraints" (Campbell 183). Importantly, it is difficult for individuals to separate online offense from their real world lives. As the article explains, words can cause hurt and it is critical for those moving online to be cognizant of this.

Online, people can craft their own identities, but that does not mean the identity is true or fully representative of that individual
In online communication, individuals rely on words to construct mental images of those that

they are in communication with. Therefore, "individuals are known and characterized by their texts" (Campbell 187) but that does not mean that the characterization is accurate or true. There are issues of false self-representations present online since there is a "greater degree of freedom and autonomy" online (Campbell 189).

"Spiritual Networking" online provides opportunities for connection offline as well
In order to connect online, individuals are required to build relationships with others. The concept of "spiritual networking," creating connections with others built on prayer and religious relationships online, can then shift to offline connections and potential involvement in the "real-world" ministries and lives of members.

Online religious communities should be seen as a new sphere of connection, where the spirit or presented identity of a person may trump their embodied presence

Internet provides an important space where the "body becomes secondary, and the 'spirit' is freed to create a personal web of connections" (Campbell 195). This allows for new opportunities for churches and religious communities to take advantage of a new way to connect with members.