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Summarizing Heidi A Campbell's Research on Religion and Church Online

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Over the last twenty-five years, Heidi A Campbell has studied what defines religious community online, the key traits of digital church, and the challenges that church leadership may face when using digital media. Campbell defines religious community as the building and maintaining of relationships through a social network that facilitates the pursuit of a common purpose related to their shared faith. Religious individuals may find this experience on a variety of digital platforms. What is common amongst the different manifestations of religious community online is people are drawn to them because of the relational aspect and the spiritual opportunities that online religious communities allow.

Campbell identifies the key characteristics and traits in an online religious community that people most value. These include a desire to find social and spiritual relationships based on intimate communication and shared passions. Her research states that some of the most important elements needed for an online church to become a true "community" is for members to feel valued, cared for, and communicated with in an honest way and direct way. Campbell has also found that many individuals online view the internet as a sacred place, a space that builds both relationships and shared faith.

She also draws attention to other issues online that religious communities may face when trying to create a relationship-based community. Online actions can have an impact on people emotionally. She notes that hurtful communication online (spreading rumors, lying, hate speech, belittling, etc.) can be just as painful to people as when such incidents are experienced offline. It is easy to assume that people's avatar or profile online are not real people, but just text or a virtual representation. This creates further potential for miscommunication and hurt amongst users and the leadership. Additionally, online group or church members are entrusted with the task of crafting their own identity, which means they can be truthful, exaggerate, or lie completely about who they are. This can be problematic for other users or church leaders to determine what is real and not real about the identity of others online. This is a common issue in secular areas of the Internet and is no different for churches and religious groups.

Campbell has also identified the primary characteristic of how people practice religion online. She argues the dynamic, flexible nature of the Internet encourages people to seek out and develop a form of "networked religion" that is highly individualized. This networked religion is defined by five key traits: networked community, shifting authority, storied identities, multisite reality, and convergent practices. These tendencies encourage Internet users to view church online as being shaped through loose affiliations that are established by the user's preference over traditional hierarchical practices. It also means that users bring their offline expectations and viewpoints online and this will influence how they interact in a digital setting.

Campbell's work also addresses challenges and debates that religious leaders seeking to do church online may face. Firstly, offline religious authority does not resemble online religious authority. Offline religious authority is based on religious training, credentials, one's job position, and both theological and ecclesiological expertise. Online religious authority is based on digital or technological expertise, communication style, having the ability to leverage multiple media platforms, and the size of one's digital footprint and followers.

This creates potential difficulties for church leadership as it requires leaders to learn and become fluent in a different kind of culture and authority. Along with this, moving online often means church leaders experience a loss of control over their message, influence, and role as religious gatekeepers. Acknowledging and embracing this loss may be seen as problematic for many leaders. Secondly, moving online creates the potential for private

worlds and ideas to become very public and religious leaders to be more easily criticized. This is a challenge for churches because it exposes them to new types of scrutiny by the public. Finally, churches and religious communities find that traditional symbols and rituals of worship are no longer set or static, but can become highly flexible when transported or translated into online contexts. This loss of control and influence requires churches to make hard choices about to what extent they must adapt to the features of the Internet and digital culture, or if they should seek to culture the technologies in ways that they are more informed by their religious tradition and values than the online context.

Campbell's work also addresses concerns raised by religious leaders about the Internet. Many leaders have speculated that involvement in online churches or communities might lead to a loss of attendance and investment in traditional churches offline. Yet, her works show that for most, online church is a supplement and not a substitute for offline community, and is viewed rather as an extension of the traditional faith community engagement. Overall, her research demonstrates that online religion provides an unprecedented opportunity to connect and impact users.

As Campbell notes, removing the "body" permits individuals to be known by their spirit which allows for users to feel a different level of connection with each other. It is evident in Campbell's research that members of online communities join them to seek connection and relationship. They want to find relationships that make them feel valued and cared for. Users view their online communities as an aspect of their social lives. In this way, online relationships impact member's lives offline as well. This is important for churches, because it emphasizes leadership should prioritize fostering an environment that promotes the building of relationships online and offline.

Lastly, the Internet provides a new way for users to feel involved in the church. Research by Campbell demonstrates that often users may begin online but religious communities can seep offline as members seek out to help in the ministry in offline ways as well. By promoting opportunities online for members to get involved off of the Internet, they can get more volunteers and foster a deeper sense of community for members both on the Internet and off.

To conclude, Campbell's extensive research demonstrates that although there are challenges in churches extending their ministries online, there are far more opportunities. If used thoughtfully, digital media can allow churches to move into a new sphere to interact with and impact members in previously impossible ways.

Ten Lessons on Building Religious Community and Church Online

By Heidi A Campbell

1. There needs to be consistency between digital and offline presentations and articulations of church identity
2. Religious community is possible online, but it is different than traditional ideas of community
3. People view participation in religious groups as part of their overall social lives
4. Religious people seek connection and coherence between their online and offline religious practices
5. Offline contexts, expectations, and behaviors offline influence online religious practice
6. The type of online community that is most desired is that which creates and encourages relationships where Internet users feel valued
7. Moving religion online does not mean an exodus from offline or traditional church
8. Online words are important, since they are used to define and represent people's identities
9. Online, people can craft their own identities, but that does not mean the identity is true or fully representative of that individual
10. 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