

NZ CHRISTIAN CHURCHES ONLINE: WEBSITES, AND MODELS OF AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION

Mary Griffiths & Ann Hardy
Department of Screen & Media Studies
University of Waikato

1. Introduction

“(He says) I give you the authority, the authority...”¹

“e-Minister is a real Presbyterian minister you can email now with any questions about matters of life and faith.”²

“Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh and blood human community”³

Mainstream religions have not been high on the cultural studies agenda so far, possibly because many scholars work within the discipline’s accepted notions of popular media. This has resulted in nationally-focussed research on, for example, mainstream reception of minority religious faiths; or within a general prioritisation of secular rather than religious topics. This approach tends to see “mass” sports entertainment media as more representative of national “culture”. National religious rituals and beliefs are, however, a cultural phenomenon like any other, and part of the

¹ Brian Tamaki, preaching on Luke 10:19 on MP3, Destiny Church Website <http://www.dtv.org.nz/mp3/vipers> [downloaded 14/02/2005].

² “E-Minister”, *Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand website* <https://secure.presbyterian.org.nz/74.0.html> [downloaded 29/08/2005].

³ Vatican statement on the Internet, cited in Kieran Flanagan, *Seen and Unseen: Visual Culture, Sociology and Theology* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004) 95.

networked flows of values and negotiated differences in a mediated interdependent world. In the last twenty-years or so, particularly in the US, pentecostal and charismatic religions have turned to new media to help organise, evangelise, recruit new members and establish new rituals of faith – and are increasingly using the power of their numbers to mobilise radically, most typically against abortion legislation and homosexuality.

This research project, the first we are aware of in NZ, sets out to map the Internet's impact on the NZ practices of Christian faith, the national organisation of churches and the empowering of religious, and socially-engaged, activities of church members. We aim to identify the various apparent models of governance and participation on four NZ websites: the Destiny Church, the Presbyterian Church, Kahui Rangitahi and New Life (NZ). Of particular interest are the relationships between conceptions of authority and online organisation and mobilisation of members, because both reinvigorate traditional behaviours, and both redirect closer attention to the wider society to which the church belongs. The four key issues are: the model of church governance represented; the audience positions constructed for members of the church community and visitors to the site; the level of interactivity and empowerment provided; and the degree of engagement and mobilisation in the secular world which is offered and/or implied. Our question: is new media, with its potential to democratise and level out relationships of power, helping to “re-form” Christians in any way? Our research is critical, interdisciplinary and qualitative, and works within a cultural/communication studies paradigm.

2. Background to New Christian Times Online

Widespread public access to information through new media, such as the Internet, has encouraged NZ churches to develop organisational websites at a time when conservative Christians, in particular, are making a global bid for increased public recognition of their beliefs and calling for revisions in the codes of public morality.⁴ NZ church websites are a relatively new phenomenon. To study them we employ Helland's distinction⁵ between sites promoting knowledge about the church and its

⁴ The most well-known examples of this are the conservative church organisations which backed the Bush bid for a second term. Closer to home, the political power of the religious right secured a senator for *Family First* party in the last Australian federal election (2004). Global media coverage of the many pop celebrities who espouse Christian values has also helped move the representation of Christian belief into new domains and publics.

⁵ Christopher Helland, “Popular Religion and the World Wide Web: A Match Made in (Cyber) Heaven,” in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (ed. Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan; New York & London: Routledge, 2004) 23-35.

stance on issues of belief (*religion online*), and sites encouraging participation from users in ritual practices of prayer, worship and contemplation (*online religion*). Website technology potentially offers a wide and developing range of services to any group, including existing and prospective church members. Databases which summarise information about all Christian churches in New Zealand, and various forms of Christian networking, are growing quickly as a resource both for church members and those interested in Christianity. Through connected groups such as *visionnetwork*, and pages such as *Churches NZ*, online seekers are helped to locate a religious faith, and a suitable nearby church to join.

Recent research from the US has found that Christians, and/or seekers after non-secular meaning, are on the net, surfing and using it for religious purposes in much the same way as any other connected person uses the technology to answer their personal needs. Pew Internet's *Faith Online* report⁶ found that, in America, 64% of wired Americans used the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes. That represents a figure of 84 million citizens. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in the US (with a high rate of new media uptake, cultural dominance of Internet protocols, and with so many active Christian affiliates) the extravagant hype that infuses all discussion of Internet growth and diversification of activities also inflects the claims being made for religious and spiritual uses. Brenda Brasher,⁷ a sociologist, quoted in the Pew Report, goes so far to predict a Reformation of Christianity akin to the one empowered by individuals' access to print technology centuries ago, when the Bible was put into the vernacular, constituting the first step in individuating and democratising religious belief. It is true that new media is extending and complicating the effects of older forms of media, and impacting in complex ways on both on ideas of community, and how communities of interest come into being. Globalising communication technologies disperse communicative power through network flows, assisting in the transformation of many forms of received authority, both religious and secular. P2P technologies

⁶ S.M. Hoover, L. Clark and L. Rainie, *Faith Online* Pew Internet and American Life Project (2004) <http://www.pewinternet.org/> [Downloaded 12 January, 2005].

⁷ Campbell also argues that Brasher's central thesis in "Give me that Online Religion" (2001) is that religious expression online should be protected and supported because religious people and their traditions "make a valuable, necessary contribution to civil society" and online religion is crucial for the future of religion. She argues that cyber-religion is invigorating concepts of sacred time, presence and spiritual experience by offering snapshots of websites dealing with Y2K prophecies, descriptions of virtual shrines, along with essays of individuals' cyber-pilgrimages. Heidi Campbell, "Approaches to Religious Research in Computer-Mediated Communication," in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture* (ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage; London & New York: T & T Clark, 2003) 213-28, 218.

and network practices encourage the sharing of knowledge and tend to construct horizontal, rather than top-down, relationships between individuals and within groups. As “connectivity” means the crossing of cultures, borders, generations, and belief systems, many utopian thinkers about the net have seen the potential of this young technology for re-forming global users’ worldviews.⁸ Much of the current literature on religion and the Internet is enthusiastic about its use as a means of spiritual renewal.⁹ Helland sums up the Internet’s potential by calling it “the ideal medium for communicating religious beliefs and practices in a social context in which syncretism, popular tradition and religion *à la carte* are among the most common forms of participation”.¹⁰

Others are more unsure of its beneficial effects and, among the potentially negative features of the technology, consider the lack of space for spiritual reflection in online practices, and the absence of embodied community ritual, a great loss to the faith, and the faithful. Caution and distrust of the medium is mirrored by those studying other fields of the virtual: the real experience of seeing communal rituals take place is, for them, the only way for communication about serious matters to take place. Flanagan, for example, writes of the ability to connect the seen and unseen which *religion online* requires:

What lies beneath the surface, what belongs to inference rather than perception, what is of symbol rather than sign point to the need to cultivate ways of seeing that can distinguish. The secularity of visual culture seldom adds in a dimension of the unseen that bears on the spiritual, or a recognition of the impact of the invisible on the mundane circumstances of life where too much is of the visible.¹¹

an attitude which is also reflected in the Vatican’s unenthusiastic statement on the Internet, used above as an epigraph. Because of the absolute authority of the Pope for Catholics, this reminder of the significance of the unseen world, and that faith’s distinguishing belief in Christ’s actual presence in the Eucharist, amounts to a directive

⁸ P. Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2001), for example, shows the greater liberalisation of ideas and world views which accompanies high use of the internet.

⁹ See, for instance, Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* (New York & London: W. W. Norton, 1999); Helland, “Popular Religion,” and S. O’Leary, “Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks,” in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (ed. Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan; London & New York: Routledge, 2004) 37-58.

¹⁰ Helland, “Popular Religion,” 23.

¹¹ Flanagan, *Seen and Unseen*, 81.

to prioritise sacramental and face-to-face ritual. Nor would the Catholic Church be likely to accept the concomitant drift of the power *from* locally-based clergy, who are in strict hierarchical governance relationships, *to* “cybercongregants” situated within a dispersed set of virtual networks and relationships, which they can initiate and manage themselves, in order to practice their faith. But, for many devout users, the Internet *is* seen as a place “for personal spiritual matters”. According to Pew findings “denomination makes a difference”¹² since Evangelical Protestants, for example, are more likely to use the Internet for personal religious practices.

These controversies and doubts aside, if one clicks through to a US-located or hosted church website, Bible group site, or religious discussion list, it is often of a sophisticated design offering not only information, but many participatory features which connect the “seen and unseen” and support individual spiritual activities. People surveyed in the Pew Report mention sending and receiving email with spiritual content, sending and receiving greeting cards, getting news and information about religious and spiritual events, downloading music, making donations and responding to a prayer request online. So, the questions which are emerging for cultural studies scholars about new media and religion are firstly, the representational (philosophical and aesthetic) ones about the visceral and spiritual features of online religious practice; and secondly, the ones which focus on the technology itself: its global and local impact on national religious cultures, the impression made by a one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many communication technology on off-line religious communities, and the way it may help mobilise Christians.¹³

3. NZ Churches: Familiar Social Responsibilities, New Volatility?

Without the help of large scale research findings such as Pew to indicate NZ trends, we started with a study of national peak body church organisations amongst the evangelical churches.¹⁴ In New Zealand, with a population the size of a moderate American city and few of the philanthropic traditions, resources and capacities of long-established US institutions, a Google search in February 2005 for “spiritual and religious organisations NZ” returns over 11,400 entries. Despite the plethora of sites,

¹² Pew Internet and American Life Project, 16-17.

¹³ Pew does not research the area of church political activity, but this is a phenomenon which is being increasingly documented in political science.

¹⁴ The Roman Catholics in NZ are a mainstream church with a high presence on the internet, but their organisation and models of authority are significantly different from most other Christian churches in NZ in that they remain hierarchical and accountable to Rome. We intend a follow-up study.

in contrast with US examples, we found that most national Christian church websites surveyed do not offer much of a range of online activities. In varying degrees they mainly offer *religion online*: information about the church and the direction of church members and site-visitors towards traditional offline ministry. Multimedia is used sparingly by some to service existing communities, and possibly expand them. Enabled P2P interactivity on national sites appears to be a recent development – some examples are the Presbyterian’s “e-ministry”, the Anglican’s Maori youth-directed blog and, although no direct feedback is allowed, the Destiny Church’s downloadable MP3 files with recorded church functions and rituals to be enjoyed by the Internet user at home, as many times as desired. Overall, interactivity is rationed, and governance structures do not appear to be opening up. The comparative analysis in section 4 below gives more details.

Yet, although New Zealand churches have not embraced the range of possibilities the Internet offers with the enthusiasm that characterises many US sites, in NZ churches which include evangelism or social activism among their aims, the Internet is being employed as a tool for community mobilisation and offline organisation.

Mainstream churches in New Zealand have had a long tradition of social activism – gathering force in the second half of the 1990s as the results of fifteen years of market reforms began to bite. Catholics and Presbyterians are both active in social justice campaigns. In 1999, an Anglican Church-led *hikoi*¹⁵ marched the length of the country to protest at growing social and economic inequality. Protest has intensified again recently as the Clark government has presided over a liberalisation of laws on moral and personal choice issues: with conservative elements, both church and political party-based, aiming to roll back many of those liberalisations.

Since the Second World War, there has been an active, slowly growing and internally volatile Pentecostal movement in New Zealand. There are links to churches in America, but, until recently, there was not much evidence that this could be seen as a politicised movement – a “religious right”.¹⁶ That is now changing, especially with the institution of new evangelical churches, such as the chain of tithing Destiny Churches led by charismatic part-Maori leader, Bishop Brian Tamaki. His organisation found a ready constituency in those members of society marginalised by the political, social and economic reforms of the previous decades. While overall numbers are still

¹⁵ The *hikoi* is a walking protest in Maoridom.

¹⁶ See B. Knowles, *New Life: A History of the New Life Churches of New Zealand 1942-1979* (Dunedin: Third Millennium Publishing, 1999) and A. Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys beyond Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches* (Wellington: Philip Garside, 2000) 124-31.

estimated to be small, Destiny and other charismatic churches are growing rapidly in contrast to mainstream churches. According to the most recent Census, those affiliated to the mainstream Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian Churches dropped by 282,789 over the years between 1991 and 2001. According to the 2001 *Statistics NZ*, the growth affiliations are in the “not further defined” category of Christianity, and in the Pentecostal, “Born Again”, Evangelical and Fundamentalist categories. These latter are marked by developing churches, younger congregations, and informal but spirit-rousing services, like Tamaki’s. Their values are “family first”, and they are conservative morally and socially.

A downloadable MP3 file on the Destiny website gives an indication of the tone of the preaching within that church. The text is Luke 10:19. Tamaki refers again and again to the gathering strength and authority which will be “unleashed” through the Auckland branch, to be a “strong, outspoken, anointed people” “who will do great exploits” and bring “a kingdom people” into being in NZ in “crucial days and perilous times”. The recorded biblical exegesis offers a combination of apocalyptic crisis talk, the promise of purposeful empowerment, a clean-cut embodiment of upwardly-mobile aspiration in the figure of Tamaki himself, and the clearly voiced adulation of a real congregation.

The morally conservative churches are perceptibly more “present” in the public domain, and play a much more active role in mediating social values than before. Destiny Church, along with other conservative groups, had marshalled the civil discontent about the Government’s proposed legislation, which now gives same-sex couples the identical legal and property rights that married heterosexual couples enjoy. The Civil Unions Bill has become a catalyst for the mobilisation of conservative values throughout New Zealand. The Internet mobilises conservative opinion and activism. For instance, Destiny Church set up a website to coordinate a protest march on the 5th of March 2005 in Auckland called “Defend the Legacy”, taking the lead in involving other Pentecostal churches. The turnout was not as large as the predicted, 20,000 people, but nevertheless around 10,000 took part. Destiny Church is also closely affiliated to a new political party, Destiny NZ, which is fielding candidates in the September 17, 2005 national elections.

These actions, and their relationship to Destiny’s online presence, are examples of the interdependent mediated world: there are the traditional networks which gather people in churches to listen to preachers, and the off-line mobilisations which include marches, political activities and celebrity political interviews. The connection to NZ’s past history of church social engagement is clear, but there is a new note in the militant Christian message of Destiny Church.

4. First Steps in NZ Churches Online Project

The events of 2004, and the presence of new voices in the public sphere, such as Tamaki's, triggered our research into the official websites – the public, online face of four NZ churches – an investigation into how their models of governance and authority are represented, and a search for an explanation for the nexus between evangelical belief and the phenomenon of increasing social engagement. Our research plan was as follows: to start with background research on the belief structures and memberships of four churches, conduct website analyses and a website watch over 2005, review the church's communications policies, and conduct key informant interviews with media officers, church leaders, website designers and pastors. At the next stage, we intend to design a larger scale online participant-focussed survey to investigate whether even a limited “à la carte” P2P approach has generated alternative online religious practices, and alternative sites of authority – and whether, religious “‘users’ can reflexively configure themselves as agents”.¹⁷

5. Website Analysis and Website Watch

There are many methods through which websites are currently evaluated from the perspectives of design, function and usability; most sets of criteria can be found online and change with industry and user demand.¹⁸ We began with a combination of usability and aesthetic criteria, followed by a checklist for *religion online* and *online religion*, noting distinguishing features of the site's representation of authority and opportunities for participation, and the affect and intended audience. Many mainstream national sites do not have even simple ways of empowering individuals

¹⁷ J. Bohman, “The Internet as a Public Sphere: Mediated Publics and the Prospects for Cosmopolitan Democracy,” in *Democracy Online: The Prospects for Democratic Renewal Through The Internet* (ed. P. Shane; New York: Routledge, 2004) 49-63, 52.

¹⁸ *bella online* <http://www.bellaonline.com/site/webdesign> concentrates on the authorship, authenticity, and contemporary nature and reliability of the information offered. Government evaluation tools for public service sites benchmark agencies' portals, and often these criteria focus on the ease with which users have access and can retrieve information and have their needs serviced by information kept in databases. In NZ, there has been some focus on evaluating more participatory forms of online activity and the features of online community. M. Griffiths, “From a Citizen's Point of View? Life Events, Publics, Choice: An Analysis of Victorian e-Government Policy and channels,” *Proceedings of the 3rd European Conference on E-Government* (Dublin, 3-4 July 2003) 165-174; M. Griffiths, “NZ's Developing E-democracy: People, Place, Culture, Difference,” *Proceedings of 5th European Conference on E-government* (Antwerp, June 16-17 2005) 183-92.

either to “talk back” to website owners, or involve themselves in assembly or mobilisation activities. On the other hand, the Internet provides a lively alternative space for working outside institutional structures; in fact, this is what it is best at providing in civil society. Individual publishing (blogging), participation in media fansites and evidence of belonging to online communities of various sorts are widespread in NZ. Churches with websites have initially responded to an existing phenomenon which empowers individuals, and they have potentially millions of existing and new subscribers for their message. Are they repeating generic features found elsewhere, or creating something distinctively religious? What do visitors to religious sites find?

5.1 Destiny Church – Limited Online Religion, Community Building

Destiny Church has a new, cleanly designed and boldly coloured website. It is easy to navigate, but there is no internal search engine. The site significantly delimits user power in other ways as well, as there is not much information about the Church and no external significant links, not even to one of Destiny Church’s political websites, “Defend the Legacy”. It is strongly “branded” in a popular media entertainment style. The familiar mode of address is anchored by a cropped photograph of a youthful-looking, charismatic Pastor Tamaki. Set against the personality-cult implications of this photograph is the image used as part of the logo, which represents a moment of collective embodied spirituality. The accompanying photographs of the other pastors and their wives are used to embody the family values of the church. There is little explanation of these values, nor what is expected of the membership through the sparse text. There is also very little information about the church organisation and, in terms of belief, the only references made are to “Kingdom theology”. The site uses no traditional Christian iconography, however, attractive photographs of church ceremonies highlight Maori cultural practices and iconography, and link to Tamaki’s brothers’ cultural tourist business, advertised lower on the homepage. Commerce and gifting online are the most interactive parts of the site, which guide visitors towards subscription and membership, by offering online forms for making donations. There is no opportunity for user feedback, and no “virtual voices” of congregants appear on the page. The authority represented is godly, and yet materially centrist, focused on Tamaki’s personality and power. Interactive participation is limited to the downloading of MP3s. This is an online practice which is possibly exclusionary for low end users, but the downloadable recordings are of emotional church events – and have an unpolished quality, raw and visceral. They promulgate Destiny’s anti-liberal moral messages, and aspirational “authority-taking”. In them, Tamaki seeks to

guide a “new nation” into being by building a community of believers who will be prepared to sacrifice and mobilise against the “vipers of religion” which includes secular people and members of churches of which Destiny disapproves. Listeners can vicariously participate, imagining themselves as part of a congregation, asynchronously sharing the moment of communion with others.

In this provision of virtual religious experience, the site may be said to offer limited *online religion*. But its main purpose is to channel users towards real churches. Summarising: it is informative about locations of churches and names of pastors; evangelical, personality-based, very user-friendly in address; exemplifies a one-to-many communication relation; and sells religion – yet there is no information offered about the financial or organisational structure of a tithed church. Paradoxically, the website’s rhetoric holds out the promise of individual authority, power, and meaning in a treacherously secular world, yet the site does not demonstrate a mutually powerful relationship between pastor and congregation. It tightly governs use and restricts communicative power, especially the ability to give feedback, and make horizontal networks between congregants. The re-forming of Christian practice here appears to be a return to fixed moral truths and an encouragement to “take authority” as abrasive social critics, under the control of the church’s leader.

5.2 *New Life International* – Mainly *Religion Online*, Community Management.

New Life International’s website, the website for a large group of Pentecostal churches, is in striking contrast with that of the Destiny Church. In practice New Life services are exuberant and marked by manifestations of the spirit of God moving through the congregants. Sermons at New Life churches are also wont to criticise the government, albeit in a less sustained fashion than Tamaki’s sermons. However, little of this energy is discernible online. Sombre blue-grey and secular in look, with few visuals except a perfunctory logo of a native fern, a popular national icon, the website is largely text-based. It looks like an information pamphlet, scanned and placed online. It offers good technical information for users about accessibility requirements (the only site surveyed to do so), and a high-level of information about the organisation, as an outreach activity for new publics. Its intended audience is mixed, but the bulk of the site clearly addresses the everyday organisational concerns and duties of church managers, pastors, and prospective “church planters”, quoting both biblical and secular authorities for its discourse on proper management, and addressing the everyday issues raised by church leaders’ responsibility, and setting the limits to their power. It is not exhortatory and political, but is engaged with contemporary moral issues insofar as they affect church leaders. Godliness is seen as instrumental

in developing “right relationships” but the site displays a contractual approach to the relationship between church leaders, congregants and the umbrella organisation of co-operating churches. Legal and fiscal guidelines are published which must be adhered to by church managers in order to stay within the network of churches. This amounts to an online credentialing facility for the organisation which is, effectively, a loose network of pastors whose congregants share Pentecostal Christian values. The network is missionary and international in reach. Its resource pages are excellent and link up with many further resources, churches, and conservative social organisations. It is largely “read only”, but includes an email function which directs enquiries to the church’s office, but not to a named official. There are no devotional exercises online, but many reports on the good works of those working in NZ and elsewhere.

In summary, the website offers resources for the management of a diverse, dispersed loose network of autonomous, co-operating churches, and a framework within which each organisation can express the work of the spirit in its own way. There is, for example, transparency and openness about processes of entry at leadership level, and an annual accountability check on pastors. This website indicates an almost horizontal group, with many-to-many communication through the channel of the peak body, and a focus on the worldly management, but spiritual work, of organisations. In terms of re-forming Christians, the website’s emphasis on the individual’s fiscal and legal accountability as an indication of the good management of a church’s affairs may be seen as an empowering technique for a horizontal network, or virtual community of believers in a church which expects local independence, and exercises collectively a facilitating, not overly authoritarian, governing hand. At the same time however, the sober, text-based style of the website indicates an organisation with an aniconic sensibility which sees little or no point in trying to use the Internet’s capacity to produce a virtually endless supply of multimedia to generate religious experience online.

5.3 Kahui Rangatahi – Youth Community Building and Online Religion

This website represents a subdivision of the Anglican Church with a target audience delineated by age and ethnicity. The owner of the website seems to be an “e-ambassador” as well as spiritual leader, and he leads by example, expecting that youth meet offline in traditional organisations, will come to the site to connect, grow, worship. The questions are, however, are the young Maori this site addresses going online? Does the site have an online constituency; are its interactive features sustainable, and what kind of publics is it creating?

The design follows youth entertainment genres such as fan-sites and blog pages. It is divided into three portals to ease the navigation of the information about the seminary and growing network, and direct visitors to the more participatory youth activities of the blog. This was not active when checked during the NZ summer holiday period, but messages had been published about the likely dates for resumption of activities. The use of colours is likely to be appealing to the target audience, as it is in keeping with a quirky, independent personal styles of blogs and e-zines. Still images of a religious nature, and bilingual text, surround the pictures of the organiser, and holiday-like snaps of his daily round in the community are posted regularly. These also represent young members of Maori communities, and are likely to be recognizable to regular users. The blog entries are owner-dominated as yet, and moderated, indicating a school-teacherly or pastoral authority. There is no response mechanism on the site overall, but a link to a *Wikipedia* entry on blogs indicates that the site has an educative function. It clearly engages with Maori ambitions for youth as the online leader is a role model. Maori aspirations for likely future leaders may be met by the school, which has an independent internal portal. The interactive potential of the site in the future, should it build its user base, is high: already there are emails, polls, and direct contact allowed with the Bishop, and deliberative spaces clearly are planned. Archived themed discussions have been on major topics of national and political interest, such as the controversial *Foreshore and Seabed Bill*. A nice touch is the map of NZ: users can follow the locations mentioned in the debate. The success of this site as a “new public” or “virtual community”, it seems, depends on the offline life it represents, and the strong personality of its owner-moderator. Whatever virtual religious community emerges will be delineated by the rule-making which exists so far, which supports the authority of the Anglican church. The attributes which the site design encourages in users are delimited by this authority: some interactive opportunities are built in but there is little potential for youth leadership or shared horizontal power in, for example, the setting of topics for discussion. A user has more possibilities to interact with church representatives and fellow congregants than in the two other sites, but it remains to be seen whether the greater openness about discussion will pay off in a more participatory organisation in future. Can this site be thought of as representing *online religion*? There is only a small amount of textual religious content, and “right behaviour” is mediated by the pop culture artistic mode, but this is an outreach site to bring Maori youth to religious ideas, help them plan for productive life goals, and give them the skills to deliberate online together. If the idea

is to build a church by engaging potential community members in a language familiar to them, then this is the start of expressing not worship, but the attitudes to mutuality and responsibility which “communion” requires.

5.4 Presbyterian Church – Religion Online, Participatory Features

The Presbyterian website represents a diverse range of activities both worldly and religious. It is well-resourced and addresses a range of publics including those new to faith, and offers resources for ministers and church leaders. It assumes a fair range of community knowledge but, while drawing on a history known and shared by the faithful, is accessible to newcomers. There is a high standard of explanation about religious beliefs, making it a good example of *religion online*. The text is reflexive and thoughtful about the world, and the governance of the church. Information about internal recruitment for roles at low level is included. It is well-designed, easy to navigate, with a good use of non-religious pictorial icons (because of sponsored Nielsen research into the negative impact of religious symbols and images on likely visitors to the site). The choice of soft colours, and the image of a genial minister in the logo foreground ahead of a happy multicultural community, appears welcoming. An encouragement of social responsibility is indicated by the link to tsunami relief on the first page (this represents a prompt to “good works”). The keynote address to the Synod is video-streamed, and the reports on the General Assembly are available, making this aspect of church governance transparent. There are two immediately interactive possibilities for the user – a general login to the site to “have your say” on new rules, and a subscription newsletter. The overall site navigation is sophisticated and the internal links good, although the feedback function was not active. The site includes viewing advice on media and film, reports on church attendance, spirituality issues and communication protocols, using advice from Nielsen research. As such it is unusual amongst our sample in reflecting on the conditions of religious communication in general (and Internet communication specifically). No online ritual experience is offered but the site provides resources for off-line ritual; it is strong on links to social justice work. The e-ministry is the most interesting of the site’s features – it is an open pastoral ministry (an e-reply is promised within forty-eight hours). The spiritual help is offered by a team of four e-ministers. Net protocols are embedded in the “trust” and privacy statements, ensuring confidentiality and promoting user confidence in the service. This is the site which is most solidly designed within contemporary Internet protocols and expectations.

6. Tentative Conclusions.

Our research is preliminary and has scoped indicative examples of national evangelical websites as a first step in understanding what is happening in Christian culture online in NZ. We have found that there is a current preponderance of *religion online* rather than *online religion*. This indicates to us that, at this early stage, the communicative potential of the Internet to re-form Christians and Christian churches is not being fully deployed at national level in these church bodies, and that, if there is no horizontal individual pressure from grassroots Christians on participatory practices, changes to current authority and governance models are unlikely. None of the national websites surveyed deploys the full communicative range of techniques offered by the Internet, neither in terms of information and resources offered, nor in the techniques for building virtual communities. Church or pastoral authority is tightly held onto online, with the exception of New Life International, and participatory experiences are limited. Nor do any of the four websites offer a range of significant religious experiences online. The one site that offers virtual exhortatory religious experience or a significant religious experience apart from virtual pastoral care, is Destiny Church. This is also the one which geared up for direct political action over the NZ election period in 2005, so that the online sermons are political as much as spiritual enterprises. Other churches engage with secular matters but the websites refer to offline activities (good works) and there is not much evidence to suggest that the three remaining churches use their national websites to mobilise politically.

Information retrieval is only the first step in democratising participation. A range of models of authority, transparency, access to leadership roles, community input, is evident among the churches but authority is generally top-down. These sites' modes of address are likely to re-invigorate believers' traditional attitudes, rather than open up beliefs to change. The possibilities used for re-forming Christians online are largely explanatory and informative, involving visual reference to off-line activities. The sites may be said to offer, *à la carte*, traditional religious beliefs.

There is a lack of meta-discourse on these sites about how technology constructs "significant" religious experience, religious community as opposed to other communities of interest, and about online authority and governance models. Migrating explanatory frameworks from communication studies to "virtual theology" would deepen understandings of the techniques of self and community. The re-forming of Christians is occurring but, in NZ, it is slower online than in the US. Meanwhile the significant re-formation may be offline, in political engagement.